

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 465 429

PS 030 388

AUTHOR Kysilko, David, Ed.
TITLE Beyond Ma Goose: Examining Today's Complex System of Early Childhood Education.
INSTITUTION National Association of State Boards of Education, Alexandria, VA.
PUB DATE 2001-00-00
NOTE 53p.; Theme issue. Produced quarterly.
AVAILABLE FROM National Association of State Boards of Education, 277 South Washington Street, Suite 100, Alexandria, VA 22314 (\$35 for 1-year subscription; \$60 for 2-year subscription; \$2 for single issue plus \$2 shipping and handling). Tel: 703-684-2000; Fax: 703-836-2313; Web site: <http://www.nasbe.org>.
PUB TYPE Collected Works - Serials (022)
JOURNAL CIT State Education Standard; v2 n2 Sum 2001
EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Child Care; Educational Policy; Family Literacy; *National Standards; *Preschool Education; Program Descriptions; Program Effectiveness; Program Evaluation; Public Policy; *State Programs; Student Evaluation
IDENTIFIERS Project Head Start; Smart Start NC; *State Policy; Subsidized Child Care Services; Universal Preschool

ABSTRACT

The theme of this issue of the quarterly journal of the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE) is the system of early childhood education in the United States, focusing on various challenges to making high-quality preschool education a reality for all children. The following articles are featured: (1) "Principles and Recommendations for Early Childhood Assessments" (Lorrie Shepard, Sharon Lynn Kagan, and Emily Wurtz); (2) "Coordinating Subsidized Child Care, Head Start, and State Prekindergarten" (Rachel Schumacher, Mark Greenberg, and Joan Lombardi); (3) "State Prekindergarten Initiatives: A Varied Picture" (Karen Schulman and Helen Blank); (4) "Early Childhood Education Program Accreditation and State Policies" (Adele Robinson); (5) "Evaluating Smart Start" (Donna Bryant and Kelly Maxwell); and (6) "Family Literacy: Pathway to Success" (Shani Yero). Regular departments for this issue include columns expressing views of the NASBE executive director, surveying the federal education scene, describing state innovations, discussing state education policymaking related to early childhood education, and highlighting the struggle between education and development in early childhood special education. (KB)

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The State Education

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Standard

The Quarterly Journal of the National Association of State Boards of Education

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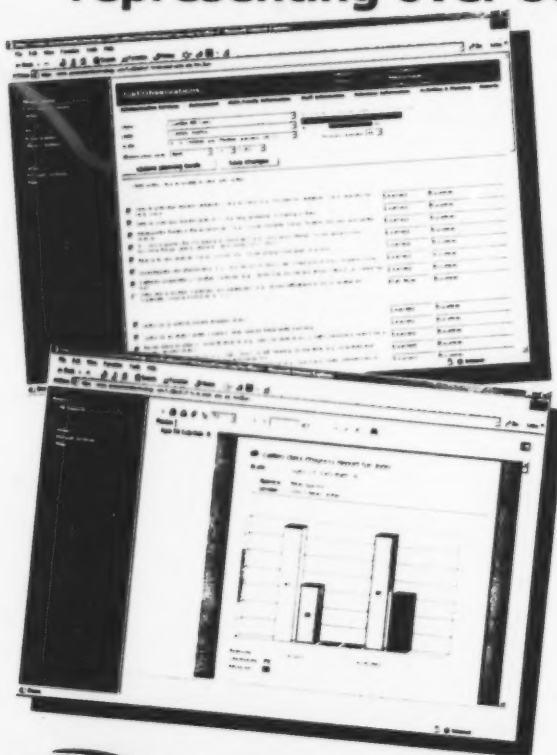
SIDE National Education Goals Panel provides recommendations on early childhood assessment •
Overview of state preschool initiatives • Evaluation of Smart Start

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Editor's Note

The State Education

Standard

Volume 2, Number 2

Summer 2001

It was not so many years ago that an issue of our journal focusing on early childhood education, and preschool education in particular, might have raised some eyebrows among state board members. "Preschool and child care issues? Important, yes, but we are K-12 policymaking bodies, after all."

But it is hard to find such sentiments today. New research in brain development that has reinforced the links between early learning experiences and later school achievement, the standards movement with its focus on high levels of achievement for all students, the sentiments of the past and current administrations that "all children can learn" and "no child should be left behind"—all of these have served to increase awareness of the importance of high-quality preschool for all children, particularly those from disadvantaged families and communities.

Yet while the goal and the advantages of "high-quality preschool for all" are plain enough, the challenges in making this a reality are also evident, as can be seen by the articles in this issue of the *Standard*. One of these challenges lies in assessments for young children. As parents, communities, states, and the federal government all pour resources into early childhood education, the need to judge quality, to make sure children are learning, and to help students who may be having difficulties have become more important. But as the authors of the National Education Goals Panel article on early childhood testing point out, extreme variations in the rate of development for very young children make them notoriously difficult to assess in a scientifically valid way—which also causes the authors to argue vigorously against any high-stakes testing for children under the age of eight. But that doesn't mean assessment isn't important, and the Goals Panel presents its series of principles and recommendations for measuring student progress.

Exactly what the state's role in early childhood education should be is another challenge that is addressed by several articles. Karen Schulman and Helen Blank survey the landscape of state initiatives, and find both promise and problems. While many states have moved forward, they point out that far too many children still lack access to quality programs, that states have very uneven standards in terms of quality requirements, and that logistical problems such as lack of transportation and language barriers still keep many children out of programs. Rachel Schumacher, Mark Greenberg, and Joan Lombardi focus on a particular challenge for states: the well-known difficulty of coordinating the multiple funding streams and maze of requirements that make up our nation's system of early childhood education. And Donna Bryant and Kelly Maxwell look at the challenges involved in evaluating a complex, statewide early childhood system: North Carolina's nationally recognized Smart Start initiative, which, they have found, is now achieving many of its goals.

Adele Robinson, a policy analyst for the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), writes about the challenge of improving preschool and child care programs through the accreditation process. Robinson also notes that important as accreditation is, it is only one element among many that are needed to ensure that high-quality educational experiences are available to all young children.

Finally, Shani Yero looks at the importance of improving parents' literacy skills as a critical factor in helping children learn. But though most family literacy efforts involve parents in preschool settings, the Families in Schools model that Yero works with brings these programs into elementary schools, offering many parents a more meaningful way to be involved in their children's education while at the same time improving their own learning skills.

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P.S. Though space considerations forced us to leave one very fine article out of the print edition—"Early Childhood Champions: The Role of Administrators in Creating Effective Educational Programs for Young Learners"—the full version of the article is available on our website at www.nasbe.org.

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Executive Summary

Brenda Lilienthal Welburn, Executive Director

In 1988, NASBE issued its groundbreaking publication, *Right from the Start: The Report of the NASBE Task Force on Early Childhood Education*, which called for innovative and comprehensive collaboration among schools, early childhood education programs, child care providers, and community agencies. Three years later, we followed this with *Caring Communities: The Report of the National Task Force on School Readiness*. Each of these reports was the culmination of a year of study by numerous state, national, and local policymakers, national leaders in early childhood education, and current practitioners in the field on how to best serve young children. Examining the developmental and educational needs of children from age three to grade three, together these reports redefined school readiness, addressed the need for state, national, and community leadership on the critical issue of early childhood education, and called for a comprehensive overhaul of the prekindergarten through primary education system.

In the years since the release of *Right from the Start* and *Caring Communities*, considerable research has been done on the significance of early childhood education and its effects on day-to-day learning. The research validates what was learned during the composition of these works—that the cognitive and emotional development and experiences of children in the early years of life and schooling are inextricably linked to their overall performance in school in later years. Since *Right from the Start*, there has been significant progress made in the field of early childhood education. Yet despite this progress and current and emerging research, many states still cling to a disjointed delivery system that leaves children and families who are most in need floundering for services. Clearly the time has come for state policymakers to fully address the needs of young children and their families.

The continuum of early learning experiences and opportunities from birth to age eight presents significant challenges and opportunities to state policymakers. The traditional path from home directly to kindergarten, with no intervening preschool, no longer exists for the majority of young children, and now more than ever there is a critical need for services and providers. Consequently, policymakers must grapple with the question of which agencies should have responsibilities for young

children. They must determine how to create a system of services that enhance learning for young children in an environment that is nurturing, supportive, and family friendly. In a time when policymakers are attempting to attract and retain skilled individuals to the teaching profession, the

We've missed our target date
for school readiness.

We cannot afford
to miss our target goal.

individuals that work with young children are among the lowest paid on the professional scales of child-serving institutions, and not surprisingly have very high rates of turnover as well. Therefore, funding, training, and retaining effective early childhood services and education providers and teachers are among the biggest challenges facing policymakers. And the most significant vacuum in standards-based reform may be the lack of uniform standards for early childhood education.

As more state and federal funding is targeted to establishing accountability, closing the achievement gap, and implementing reading initiatives, it is important that states are reminded of the first national education goal: "By the year 2000, all children in America will start school ready to learn." Without the support and skills provided through effective early learning, we cannot expect to meet the objectives outlined by the National Education Goals Panel to ensure that children have the "nutrition, physical activity experiences, and health care needed to arrive at school with healthy minds and bodies and to maintain the mental alertness necessary to be prepared to learn." We've missed our target date. We cannot afford to miss our target goal.



Principles and Recommendations for Early Childhood Assessments



AMERICANS WANT AND NEED GOOD INFORMATION ON THE well-being of young children. Parents want to know if their children will be ready for school. Teachers and school administrators want to know if their programs are effective and if they are providing children the right programs and services. Policymakers want to know which programs, policies, and expenditures will help children and their families, and whether they are effective over time. Yet young children are notoriously difficult to assess accurately, and well-intended testing efforts in the past have done unintended harm.

Lorrie Shepard, Sharon Lynn Kagan, and Emily Wurtz

editors, on behalf of the Early Childhood Assessment Resource Group of the National Education Goals Panel

Note: The principles and recommendations detailed here were developed by advisors to the bipartisan National Education Goals Panel to help early childhood professionals and policymakers meet their information needs by assessing young children appropriately and effectively. This article is adapted from the advisory group's full report, Principles and Recommendations for Early Childhood Assessments, which is available from the National Education Goals Panel, 1255 22nd Street, NW, Suite 502, Washington, DC 20037, www.negp.gov.

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General Principles

Assessing children in the earliest years of life—from birth to age eight—is difficult because it is the period when young children's rates of physical, motor, and linguistic development outpace growth rates at all other stages. Growth is rapid, episodic, and highly influenced by environmental supports such as nurturing parents, quality caregiving, and the learning setting.

Because young children learn in ways and at rates different from older children and adults, assessments must be tailored accordingly. Because young children come to know things through doing as well as through listening, and because they often represent their knowledge better by showing than by talking or writing, paper-and-pencil tests are not adequate. Because young children do not have the experience to understand what the goals of formal testing are, testing interactions may be very difficult or impossible to structure appropriately. Because young children develop and learn so fast, tests given at one point in time may not give a complete picture of learning. And because young children's achievements at any point are the result of a complex mix of their ability to learn and past learning opportunities, it is a mistake to interpret measures of past learning as evidence of what could be learned.

For these reasons, how we assess young children and the principles that frame such assessments need special attention. What works for older children or adults simply will not work for younger children. Educators and child development specialists have long recognized this uniqueness of the early years. Informal assessment has characterized the early childhood field. Early educators have observed and recorded children's behavior naturalistically, watching children in their natural environments as youngsters carry out everyday activities. These observations have proven effective for purposes of chronicling children's development, cataloging their accomplishments, and tailoring programs and activities within the classroom to meet young children's rapidly changing needs.

Recently, however, there has been an increase in formal assessments and testing, the results of which are used to make "high-stakes" decisions such as tracking youngsters into high- and low-ability

The following general principles should guide both policies and practices for the assessment of young children.

- **Assessments should bring about benefits for children.**

Gathering accurate information from young children is difficult and potentially stressful. Formal assessments may also be costly and take resources that could otherwise be spent directly on programs and services for young children. To warrant conducting assessments, there must be a clear benefit—either in direct services to the child or in improved quality of educational programs.

- **Assessments should be tailored to a specific purpose and should be reliable, valid, and fair for that purpose.**

Assessments designed for one purpose are not necessarily valid if used for other purposes. In the past, many of the abuses of testing with young children have occurred because of misuse.

- **Assessment policies should be designed recognizing that reliability and validity of assessments increase with children's age.**

The younger the child, the more difficult it is to obtain reliable and valid assessment data. It is particularly difficult to assess children's cognitive abilities accurately before age six. Because of problems with reliability and validity, some types of assessment should be postponed until children are older, while other types of assessment can be pursued, but only with necessary safeguards.

- **Assessments should be age-appropriate in both content and the method of data collection.**

Assessments of young children should address the full range of early learning and development, including physical well-being and motor development; social and emotional development; approaches toward learning; language development; and cognition and general knowledge. Methods of assessment should recognize that children need familiar contexts in order to be able to demonstrate their abilities. Abstract paper-and-pencil tasks may make it especially difficult for young children to show what they know.

- **Assessments should be linguistically appropriate, recognizing that to some extent all assessments are measures of language.**

Regardless of whether an assessment is intended to measure early reading skills, knowledge of color names, or learning potential, assessment results are easily confounded by language proficiency, especially for children who come from home backgrounds with limited exposure to English, for whom the assessment would essentially be an assessment of their English proficiency. Each child's first- and second-language development should be taken into account when determining appropriate assessment methods and in interpreting the meaning of assessment results.

- **Parents should be a valued source of assessment information, as well as an audience for assessment results.**

Because of the fallibility of direct measures of young children, assessments should include multiple sources of evidence, especially reports from parents and teachers. Assessment results should be shared with parents as part of an ongoing process that involves parents in their child's education.



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groups, (mis)labeling or retaining them, or using test results to sort children into or out of kindergarten and preschools. In many cases, the instruments developed for one purpose or even one age group of children have been misapplied to other groups. As a result, schools have often identified as "not yet ready" for kindergarten, or as "too immature" for group settings, large proportions of youngsters (often boys and non-English speakers) who would benefit enormously from the learning opportunities provided in those settings. In particular, because the alternative treatment is often inadequate, screening out has fostered inequities, widening—and perpetuating—the gap between youngsters deemed ready and unready.

Despite these difficulties, demands for assessments of student learning are increasing. Pressed by calls for greater accountability and enhanced educational performance, states are developing standards for school-aged children and are creating new criteria and approaches for assessing the achievement of challenging academic goals. In this context, calls to assess young children—from birth through the earliest grades in school—are also increasing. This article attempts to indicate how best to craft such assessments in light of young children's unique development, recent abuses of testing, and the legitimate demands from parents and the public for clear and useful information.

Important Purposes of Assessment for Young Children

THE INTENDED USE OF AN ASSESSMENT—its purpose—determines every other aspect of how the assessment is conducted.

Purpose determines the content of the assessment (What should be measured?); methods of data collection (Should the procedures be standardized? Can data come from the child, the parent, or the teacher?); technical requirements of the assessment (What level of reliability and validity must be established?); and, finally, the stakes or consequences of the assessment, which in turn determine the kinds of safeguards necessary to protect against potential harm from fallible assessment-based decisions.

For example, if data from a statewide assessment are going to be used for school accountability, then it is important that data be collected in a standardized way to ensure comparability of school results. If children in some schools are given practice ahead of time so that they will be familiar with the task formats, then children in all schools should be provided with the same practice. In contrast, when a teacher is working with an individual child trying to help that child learn, assessments almost always occur in the context of activities and tasks that are already familiar, so practice or task familiarity is not at issue. In the classroom context, teachers may well provide help while assessing to take advantage of the learning opportunity and to figure out exactly how a child is thinking by seeing what kind of help makes it possible to take the next steps.

Similarly, the technical standards for reliability and validity are much more stringent for high-stakes accountability assessment than for informal assessments used by individual care givers and teachers to help children learn. The consequences of accountability assess-

ments are much greater, so the instruments used must be sufficiently accurate to ensure that important decisions about a child are not made as the result of measurement error.

Serious misuses of testing with young children occur when assessments intended for one purpose are used inappropriately for other purposes. For example, the content of IQ measures intended to identify children for special education is not appropriate content to use in planning instruction. At the same time, assessments designed for instructional planning may not have sufficient validity and technical accuracy to support high-stakes decisions such as placing children in a special kindergarten designated for at-risk children.

An appropriate assessment *system* may include different assessments for different categories of purpose, such as:

- assessments to support learning,
- assessments for identification of special needs,
- assessments for program evaluation and monitoring trends, and
- assessments for high-stakes accountability.

In the sections that follow, the requirements for each of these assessment purposes are described. Only under special circumstances would it be possible to serve more than one purpose with the same assessment, and then usually at greater cost, because the technical requirements of each separate purpose must still be satisfied.*

*For more information, read the section on "Combining Assessment Purposes" on page 32 of the full Goals Panel report.)

Purpose 1. Assessing to Promote Children's Learning and Development

Definition of purpose. Assessing and teaching are inseparable processes. When children are assessed as part of the teaching-learning process, then assessment information tells caregivers and teachers what each child can do and what he or she is ready to learn next. For example, parents watch an infant grow stronger and more confident in walking while holding on to furniture or adults. They "assess" their child's readiness to walk and begin to encourage independent walking by offering outstretched hands across small spaces. In the same vein, preschool teachers and primary-grade teachers use formal and informal assessments to gauge what things children already know and understand, what things could be understood with more practice and experience, and what things are too difficult without further groundwork. Teachers also use their assessments of children's learning to reflect on their own teaching practices, so that they can adjust and modify curricula, instructional activities, and classroom routines that are ineffective.

Audience. The primary audience for assessments used to support learning is *the teacher*, recognizing, of course, that parents are each child's first teachers. The primary caregiver is asking himself questions about

what the child understands, what she does not understand, what she should be learning, and what is too soon for her to be learning, so that the caregiver is constantly providing children with opportunities to learn that are closely congruent with where they are on a learning continuum. In more structured settings, classroom assessments are used by teachers on an ongoing basis to plan and guide instruction and to identify which children need additional help. *Children and parents* are also important audiences. *Principals and primary-grade teachers* may also work together to review instructional assessments.

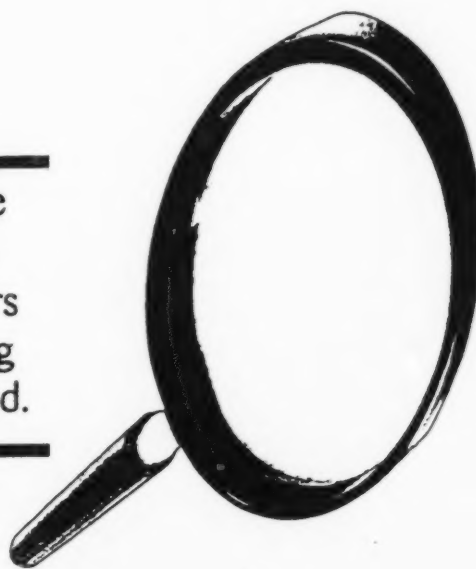
Policymakers at the state and district levels are not the audience for the results of classroom-level assessments. However, policymakers have a legitimate interest in knowing that such assessments are being used at the school level to monitor student learning and to provide targeted learning help, especially for children who are experiencing learning difficulties, such as learning to read. While external accountability testing is not appropriate for first and second graders, policymakers may wish to require that schools have plans in place to monitor student progress and to identify and serve children in need of more intensified help.

Technical requirements. In order for assessments to support learning and

development, the content of classroom assessments must be closely aligned with what children are learning, and the timing of assessments must correspond to the specific days and weeks when children are learning particular concepts. Often, this means that informal assessments are made by observing children during an instructional activity. To use assessment information effectively, caregivers and teachers must have enough knowledge about child development and cultural variations to be able to understand the meaning of a child's response and to locate it on a developmental continuum.

The reliability and validity requirements for assessments used to support learning are the least stringent of any of the assessment purposes. Over time, teachers' assessments become reliable and consequential, in the sense that multiple assessment events and occasions yield evidence of patterns or consistencies in a child's work, but the day-to-day decisions that caregivers and teachers make on the basis of single assessments are low-stakes decisions. If an incorrect decision is made, for example, in judging a child's reading level to help select a book from the library (this book is too easy), that decision is easily changed the next day when new assessment data are available.

Policymakers...are not the audience for the results of classroom-level assessments. However, policymakers have a legitimate interest in knowing that such assessments are being used.



Age continuum. How old a child is within the early childhood age span of birth to eight years old affects both the what and how of assessment. At all ages, attention should be paid to physical well-being and motor development; social and emotional development; approaches toward learning; language development; and cognition and general knowledge. Beginning in first grade, greater emphasis is placed on language and literacy development and other cognitive-academic domains, though assessment in other domains may continue. Ideally, there should not be an abrupt shift in assessment and instruction from kindergarten to first grade. Instead, preschool assessments used as part of teaching should introduce age-appropriate aspects of emergent literacy and numeracy curricula, and in grades one to three, physical, social-emotional, and disposition learning goals should continue to be part of classroom teaching and observation. Methods of collecting assessment data include direct observation of children during natural activities; looking at drawings and samples of work; asking questions either orally or in writing; or asking informed adults about the child. The younger the child, the more appropriate it is to use observation. As age increases, especially by third grade, the frequency of more formal assessment "events" should increase, but should still be balanced with informal methods.

Recommendations for what policymakers can do

1. Policymakers should develop or identify assessment materials, to be used instructionally, that exemplify important and age-appropriate learning goals. At the earliest ages, caregivers need tools to assist in observing children. Lacking such assessment materials, preschool programs may misuse screening measures for such purposes. Many local schools and districts lack the resources to develop curricula and closely aligned assessments consistent with standards-based reforms. In order for assessment results to be useful instructionally, they should

be tied to clear developmental or knowledge continua, with benchmarks along the way to illustrate what progress looks like. Because it is too great an undertaking for individual teachers or early childhood programs to develop such materials on their own, efforts coordinated at the state level can make a significant improvement in assessment practices.

2. Policymakers should support professional development. Early childhood care providers and teachers need better training in children's development within curricular areas in order to be effective in supporting children's learning. Deep understanding of subject matter enables teachers to capitalize on naturally occurring opportunities to talk about ideas and extend children's thinking. In order to make sense of what they are observing, caregivers and teachers need clear understanding of what typical development looks like, and they also need to understand and appreciate normal variation. Teachers and caregivers also need explicit training in how to use new forms of assessment—not only to judge a child's progress, but to evaluate and improve their own teaching practices.

Purpose 2. Identifying Children for Health and Special Services

Definition of purpose. Assessments used for Purpose 2 help to identify special problems and to determine the need for additional services beyond what regular caregivers can provide. The purpose of identification is to secure special services. Purpose 2 refers to identification of disabilities such as blindness, deafness, physical disabilities, speech and language impairment, serious emotional disturbance, mental retardation, and specific learning disabilities. It also refers to more routine checks for vision, hearing, and immunization to ensure that appropriate health services are provided.

Because of the potential inaccuracy of nearly all sensory and cognitive measures

and the cost of in-depth assessments, identification of special needs usually occurs in two stages. *Screening* is the first step in the identification process. It involves a brief assessment to determine whether referral for more in-depth assessment is needed. Depending on the nature of the potential problem, the child is then referred to a physician or child-study team for a more complete evaluation.

Audience. The audience for the results of special-needs assessments are the adults who work most closely with the child: the specialists who conducted the assessment and who must plan the follow-up treatment and intervention; parents who must be involved in understanding and meeting their child's needs; and the preschool or primary-grade teacher who works with the child daily and who, most likely, made the referral seeking extra help.

Technical requirements. Except for extreme disabilities, accurate assessment of possible sensory or cognitive problems in young children is very difficult. The instruments used are fallible, and children themselves vary tremendously in their responses from one day to the next or in different contexts. In the field of special education, there is a constant tension between the need to identify children with disabilities to ensure early intervention and help, versus the possible harm of labeling children and possibly assigning them to ineffective treatments.

The two-step process is cost-effective, practical, and makes sense so long as the results are only used to signal the need for follow-up assessment. The following warnings are highlighted to guard against typical misuses of screening instruments:

Screening measures are only intended for the referral stage of identification. They are limited assessments and typically are administered by school personnel who are not trained to make interpretations about disabilities. Screening measures should never be the sole measure used to identify children for special education. Because screening instruments have content like IQ tests, they should also not be used for instructional planning.



Age continuum. Special needs identification starts with the most severe—and most easily recognizable—problems and then identifies children with milder problems as they get older. As children enter preschool, individual children with possible developmental delays should be referred for in-depth assessment. Some mild disabilities may only become apparent in the school context or, in fact, may only be a problem because of the demands of the school setting. Again, indications of problems should lead to referral for in-depth assessment. Universal hearing and vision screening programs are usually targeted for kindergarten or first grade to ensure contact with every child. Such programs are intended to check for milder problems and disabilities that have gone undetected. For example, if a child has not received regular health checkups, a routine kindergarten screening may uncover a need for glasses.

Recommendations for what policymakers can do

1. States should ensure that all children have access to a regular health care provider to check for developmental milestones and to ensure that children are on schedule for immunizations by age two. In addition, states should provide vision and hearing screenings for all children by age six.
2. Mild forms of cognitive and language disabilities are particularly hard to identify. We know, however, that effective treatments for children with mild cognitive and language disabilities and most children at risk for significant reading difficulties all involve the same kinds of high-quality, intensive language and literacy interventions. Therefore, policymakers should consider increasing the availability and intensity of such services for broader populations of students who are educationally at risk, including children in

poverty and children thought to have special learning needs.

3. Given the potential for misuse of screening measures, states and districts that mandate screening tests should consider how they are being used and should evaluate whether identifications in their jurisdiction are more accurate with the use of formal tests than in states or districts where only parent and teacher referrals are used.
4. States that mandate administration of cognitive screening measures should expressly forbid the use of screening tests for purposes other than for referral. Specifically, screening tests should not be used as readiness tests to exclude children from school; they should not be used to track children by ability in kindergarten and first grade; and they should not be used to plan instruction unless a valid relationship with local curricula has been established.

Purpose 3. Monitoring Trends and Evaluating Programs and Services

Definition of purpose. For Purpose 3, assessment data are gathered about groups of children in the aggregate and are used by policymakers to make decisions about educational and social programs. In this category, we include two different types of measures: *social indicators*, used to assess the adequacy of services to children or conditions in the environment, and *direct measures of children*, where children themselves are the sources of the data. Examples of social indicators include the percentage of mothers in a state who receive well-baby care, the percentage of two-year-olds on schedule with immunizations, or the percentage of low-income children who attend quality preschool programs. Direct measures of children's performance could include the degree of language development or familiarity with concepts of print. Such measures, when aggregated for groups of children and used for Purpose 3, could assess the desired outcomes of quality preschool. Note, however, that these assessments are not used to make decisions

about the children who participate, but instead are used to evaluate programs.

We have combined within Purpose 3 two closely related uses of aggregate data, *monitoring trends* and *program evaluation*. Large-scale assessment programs such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) serve a monitoring function. Data for the nation and for states are gathered on a regular cycle to document any changes in levels of student performance. Assessments designed to monitor trends could be used to answer the question, "How is my state doing compared to other states or industrialized nations?"

Program evaluation refers to large-scale evaluation studies such as the evaluation of preschool, Head Start, or Title I programs. Program evaluations help to document the quality of program delivery and to determine whether programs are effective in achieving intended outcomes. In this sense, the uses of data under Purpose 3 hold programs "accountable" and hold states "accountable" for the adequacy of social conditions and services to young children. However, because the use of data to judge national or state programs entails consequences for the programs rather than for individuals, it is still relatively low-stakes for the individual children, teachers, schools, or local early childhood programs involved. Because of very different implications for technical safeguards, we have drawn a sharp distinction between monitoring and program evaluation uses of data and the high-stakes accountability uses of assessments described in Purpose 4, which entail consequences for individuals.

Audience. Policymakers are the primary audience for aggregate assessment data. Trend data and results of program evaluations are also important to the public and to educators and social service providers with particular responsibility for improving programs such as Early Head Start and Even Start. The data can also be used to inform the public regarding the overall status of America's young children, as well as identifying where services are needed to foster children's optimal development.

Technical requirements. Because of their use in making important policy decisions,

large-scale assessment data must meet high standards of technical accuracy. For example, if policy changes are going to be made because reading scores have gone up or down, it is essential that the reported change be valid, and not an artifact of measurement error or changes in the test. One of the difficulties, for example, of using teacher opinion surveys to report on kindergartners' readiness for school is that changes over time could be happening because children are becoming more or less ready or because teachers' expectations of readiness vary or are changing. In addition, in order to inform public policy adequately, large-scale trend data and evaluation measures should address the conditions of learning—the adequacy of programs, the level of training of caregivers and teachers, the curriculum materials used, and the adequacy of support services—as well as the outcomes of early education and intervention.

Fortunately, the difficulties in measuring young children accurately can be compensated for in Purpose 3 by the aggregate nature of the data. Instead of in-depth assessment of each child needed to ensure reliability and validity for Purpose 2, gathering data from sufficient numbers of children can ensure accuracy for purposes of evaluating programs. *Matrix sampling*, whereby each child participating in the assessment takes only part of the total assessment, has two distinct advantages. First, it allows comprehensive coverage of a broad assessment domain without overburdening any one child or student who participates in the assessment. Second, because each student takes only a portion of the total assessment, it is impossible to use the results to make decisions about individual children. This second feature is especially important as a safeguard against misuse of assessment results.

Age continuum. Because of the difficulties in obtaining direct measures of learning with young children, the types of measures that can be included in a monitoring system or evaluation study are very different for children at different ends of the age range from birth to age eight. For children from birth to two, the only direct measures that are sufficiently accurate to be feasible in a

large-scale, every-child data collection effort are measures of physical characteristics such as birth weight or immunization.

For three- and four-year-olds, social indicators that describe the adequacy of services in support of learning and development are presently the preferred mode of assessment. For example, Ohio's annual *Progress Report on Education* reports data on the percentage of three- and four-year-olds in poverty who participate in Head Start or preschool. It is also possible to assess learning of three- and four-year-olds directly. Although good measures are not readily available off the shelf at present, it is technically possible to construct direct measures of cognitive, language, social, and motor learning for three- and four-year-olds. To avoid over-testing and protect against misuse, these assessments should use matrix sampling procedures. To ensure appropriate and accurate procedures, assessments should be administered to children individually by trained examiners under controlled conditions. Although direct measures of learning are possible in the context of large-scale program evaluations, it may still be costly and unfeasible to establish a state or national monitoring system to assess three- or four-year-olds. The problem would not be just with creating the direct measures themselves, but with the difficulties in locating and sampling all of the three- or four-year-olds in a state.

Beginning at age five, however, it would be possible to administer direct measures of learning outcomes to children in school as part of a monitoring system. For example, the Goals Panel's Goal 1 Resource Group on School Readiness proposed a national Early Childhood Assessment to provide comprehensive information about the status of the nation's children during their kindergarten years. The envisioned assessment would not only address the multiple dimensions of early learning and development, but would also counteract the fallible nature of each data source by collecting information from parents, teachers, and children themselves, through both direct measures and portfolios of classroom work. In addition, individual states could consider developing an early childhood assessment program for monitoring trends. However, the cost of developing

such a system that is both comprehensive and technically sound would be substantial.

Recommendations for what policymakers can do

1. Before age five, large-scale assessment systems designed to inform educational and social policy decisions about young children should focus on social indicators that measure the conditions of learning. Direct measures of learning outcomes for three- and four-year-olds can be developed and used in large-scale program evaluations, such as Head Start, Even Start, and Title I in the preschool years, but must be administered under controlled conditions and using matrix sampling. Results should not be reported for individual children.
2. Beginning at age five, it is possible to use direct measures, including measures of children's learning, as part of a comprehensive early childhood system to monitor trends. Matrix sampling procedures should be used to ensure technical accuracy and at the same time protect against the misuse of data to make decisions about individual children. Because such systems are costly to implement, states or the nation should pick one grade level for purposes of monitoring learning trends in early childhood, most likely either kindergarten or first grade.

Purpose 4. Assessing Academic Achievement to Hold Individual Students, Teachers, and Schools Accountable

Definition of purpose. Purpose 4 refers to external examinations, mandated by an authority outside the school, usually the state or school district, and administered to



assess academic achievement and to hold students, teachers, and schools accountable for desired learning outcomes. For policymakers, there is a close similarity between the use of assessment data for Purpose 3 (monitoring trends and evaluating programs) and Purpose 4. The important distinction between Purposes 3 and 4 is how individuals who participate in the assessment—teachers and students—are affected by assessment results. If results are reported for individual students, classrooms, or schools, then the assessment has much higher stakes than either day-to-day instructional assessments or statewide trend data. Obviously, when assessment results are used to retain students in kindergarten or to award merit pay for teachers, the consequences of assessment are serious. Research evidence shows, however, that merely reporting school results in the newspaper is sufficient to give high stakes to assessment results with accompanying changes produced in instructional practices. Therefore, the decision to report scores for individual students and schools places assessments in this “accountability” category, whether or not the assessment is explicitly labeled as an accountability system.

Audience. Policymakers and the general public are, again, the primary audience for accountability data. An expressed intention of school-by-school reporting and reporting of individual student results is to give local constituencies, especially parents, the data they need to be informed about the quality of local schools and to lobby for program improvement.

Technical requirements. Accountability assessments may be similar in content to assessments used for monitoring trends. Both should be comprehensive measures of important learning goals. At higher grade levels, in fact, some states have school accountability systems that are also used to report state and district trends in achievement. Standards for reliability and validity are more difficult to meet for accountability purposes, however, because standards for technical accuracy must be met at the lowest unit of reporting. Thus, individual student scores must be sufficiently reliable,

instead of just the state or district mean being reliable. Because each individual score must be sufficiently reliable and valid, it is not possible to use the aggregation of scores to compensate for inaccuracies in individual measures. Individual-score reporting also precludes the use of matrix sampling to sample an assessment domain broadly. Instead, for fairness reasons, all students must take the same test.

The high-stakes nature of accountability assessments also contributes to their possible inaccuracy. All assessments are fallible and potentially corruptible. Results can be distorted by departures from standardized administration procedures (i.e., allowing more time) or by inappropriate teaching-to-the-test (i.e., giving practice questions that closely resemble the assessment). These practices are documented to occur more frequently when the results of testing have high-stakes consequences for students or teachers.

Age continuum. Direct measures of learning outcomes are fraught with error throughout the entire early childhood age span. Such errors have very different consequences in an accountability context than in classroom contexts, where teachers are constantly learning new things about each child. Although standardized measures of children's physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development could be constructed and administered for purposes of program evaluation and monitoring trends—because data aggregation would provide both safeguards and improved accuracy—such assessments cannot be made sufficiently reliable and fair to be used for high-stakes decisions about individual children and schools.

Recommendations for what policymakers can do

1. Before age eight, standardized achievement measures are not sufficiently accurate to be used for high-stakes decisions about individual children and schools. Therefore, high-stakes assessments intended for accountability purposes should be delayed until the end of third grade (or preferably fourth grade).

2. Although it is not technically defensible for states or districts to administer formal, standardized measures to hold first and second graders to grade-level standards, policymakers have a legitimate concern that third grade is “too late” to identify children who are falling behind. As suggested under Purpose 1, policymakers at the state and district levels could reasonably require that teachers and the schools have procedures in place to monitor student progress using instructionally relevant assessments, and that schools have a plan for providing intensified special help if children are having difficulty, especially in learning to read.

Congress charged the Goals Panel advisors to offer “clear guidelines regarding the nature, functions, and uses of early childhood assessments.” In examining current trends in state and local policies, we found numerous efforts to guard against testing misuses of the past, as well as positive efforts to devise standards and assessments that would clearly document children's learning. We hope that these recommendations and principles will be useful to educators and parents, as well as to state policymakers who hold the authority for determining testing policies. Ultimately, our goal is to set high expectations for early learning and development, to make sure that no child who falls behind goes unnoticed, and at the same time to help parents and the public understand how varied are the successful paths of early learning, depending on the rate of development, linguistic and cultural experiences, and community contexts.

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coordinating programs

Coordinating

Subsidized Child Care, Head Start, and State Prekindergarten

Historically, the United States has been known both

for its large number of perfectly housed children and

for its large number of children who lack even

the most basic necessities of life. Rising

child poverty rates have led to a growing

concern about the quality of care

and education that young children receive.

Head Start, the nation's largest

early childhood program, has

been a major force in the

development of early childhood

education. The program has

been instrumental in the

development of state prekindergarten

programs. The program has

also been instrumental in the

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Next Steps in State Initiatives to Promote Early Learning

by Rachel Schumacher, Mark Greenberg, and Joan Lombardi

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STATE INITIATIVES TO PROMOTE EARLY LEARNING: CHALLENGES AND RESPONSES

In planning early education initiatives, states and localities do not begin with a blank slate. Many children are already participating in early care and education arrangements paid for by parents and multiple federal and state funding streams. Much of the challenge for states and localities involves questions about how to coordinate, modify, and build upon the strengths of these existing systems in an effort to create a more comprehensive structure of early care and education. We found five overarching challenges:

1. Developing a comprehensive vision that encompasses both the need for early education for children and for work supports for families;
2. Expanding fiscal resources;
3. Addressing regulatory differences among programs and funding streams;
4. Implementing early education initiatives across different structures and constituencies; and
5. Tracking progress and measuring results.

Following is a brief description of each challenge and some examples of state responses.

1. Developing a Comprehensive Vision

Underlying many of the other issues states and localities face is the need for policymakers to develop a comprehensive vision encompassing the goals of school readiness for children and support for working parents. The need for such a vision is particularly important because historically, the goals of school readiness and work support have often been articulated separately, resulting in programs or funding streams with a principal emphasis on one or the other.

THREE STATE EARLY LEARNING INITIATIVES

The authors' work in three states with extensive experience in developing major early education initiatives provided significant data for this article. While each state has taken a different approach, there are insights and common themes that emerge from their experiences.

- 11 In Georgia, state lottery money has been used to fund a free prekindergarten program available to all families—drawing on and working with child care centers, Head Start, and public schools. Most Georgia four-year-olds participate in Georgia Pre-K. Participating programs must choose one of several approved curricula and operate classrooms for at least 6.5 hours a day, 180 days a year.
- 12 In Massachusetts, the state's Community Partnerships for Children initiative has provided funding to localities to coordinate planning and expand the supply and quality of early education settings for three- and four-year-old children of working parents. Localities must form councils including representation from child care, Head Start, and school districts and develop plans to meet local needs. Parents pay according to a sliding fee scale.
- 13 In Ohio, the state has committed resources to reach more Head Start-eligible children through state-funded Head Start slots and partnerships between Head Start grantees and child care centers and family child care providers. The state has encouraged use of blended funding from federal and state Head Start funding and the child care subsidy funding stream to provide full-day, full-year services that follow Head Start Performance Standards.

State Responses:

- Engaging in an evolutionary process of re-envisioning how services fit together—Each state has made efforts to strengthen the work support components of school readiness-focused programs while also strengthening the capacity of existing work support-focused child care programs to promote school readiness. Yet no state has achieved consensus on how best to coordinate these components into a cohesive structure.
- Executives and legislators serving as catalysts for new early care and education initiatives—In each state, state leaders often played a key role in either articulating priorities or bringing key players to the table.
- Broadening and maintaining support for an early education vision through continual efforts and vigilance—In each state, early education leaders have not only worked to develop a comprehensive vision for a state's early care and education system, they have also engaged in ongoing efforts to communicate this vision in a manner that keeps key players and the public engaged.

2. Expanding Fiscal Resources

The current levels of federal and state funding are too low to make services affordable to the number of children who would potentially benefit from participating in early care and education services, nor can these funds provide the quality of services necessary to meet school readiness goals. The chart at right provides information on the main sources of funding targeted to early care and education.

State Responses:

- Committing additional federal and state dollars—Each state has phased-in significant state funding commitments to these initiatives and has increased use of federal dollars. Yet none have reached the point of being able to provide all young children access to full-day, full-year early education programs.
- Re-directing Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grant funds to child care and early education purposes—Each state is using TANF for early care and education services. The overall federal contribution these states use, derived mostly from TANF, has played a key role in the states' expansion of early education services. Yet state policymakers feel uncertain about the continued availability of these funds, making long-term planning difficult for states.

3. Addressing Regulatory Differences among Programs and Funding Streams

Among the major sources of federal dollars for early care and education (the Head Start program, Child Care and Development Fund [CCDF], and TANF), there are different rules regarding which children are eligible for services, how funds are distributed, and what standards govern provision of early learning services.

State Responses:

- Allocating and managing funds creatively across programs—In each state we found significant examples of providers who are maximizing the use of federal and state resources through local partnerships, blended funding, and cost

MAJOR SOURCES OF FUNDING FOR EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION¹

Funding Source	Appropriation/ Amount	Children Served	Percent of Eligible Children Served
Head Start	\$5.3 billion in FY00 ² (federal)	813,000 (annual)	57% of poor 3- and 4- year-old children ³
Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF)	\$3.2 billion in FY99 ⁴ (federal) \$1.6 billion in FY99 (state)	1.8 million (average monthly)	12% of maximum federally eligible children (not limited to 3- and 4-year-old children) ⁵
Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)	\$3.5 billion redirected to child care in FY00 ⁶ (federal)	N/A	Data not available
State Prekindergarten Initiatives (non-federal dollars)	\$1.7 billion in 1998-1999 school year ⁷ (state)	724,610 (annual)	10% of 3- and 4- year-old children
Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)	\$407 million in 1999-2000 school year ⁸ (federal)	313,00 (annual)	8% of all children that would enter kindergarten
Dependent Care Tax Credit (DCTC) and Dependent Care Assistance Program (DCAP)	\$2.2 billion (DCTC) and \$4 billion (DCAP) in estimated foregone federal tax revenue ⁹	Total unknown; 5.5 million taxpayers claimed the DCTC in 1999	N/A

allocation methods. Each state also has partnerships between providers whose services are primarily funded through different federal funding streams or single providers who are blending multiple funding streams in order to provide full-day, full-year early education services.

- Using the flexibility of CCDF rules to increase ease of blending subsidy dollars with Head Start and state prekindergarten program rules—Each state is examining ways in which rules may be made more flexible. For example, Ohio lengthened the period of certification for child care subsidy from six to twelve months in part to make cross-program partnerships easier. The federal Child Care Bureau has clarified that states have flexibility to change recertification periods for services provided with CCDF funds in order to coincide with those of a collaborating program (such as when Head Start and CCDF funds are used to provide full-day, full-year Head Start services).
- Using prospective grant funding to encourage the development of stable, quality programs—Each of the study states uses a grant-making process to require programs to meet key standards and builds in the costs of providing those enhanced quality services in its state funding awards. Current federal CCDF law requires that states ensure parental choice in choosing child care arrangements when CCDF funds are used, but states may still include contracted services in their CCDF programs so long as parental choice is respected. States are free to use other dollars as a lever to encourage the development of needed quality services.
- Paying rates more reflective of the cost of quality care to providers participating in the early education initiative—Georgia and Massachusetts have developed provider payment schedules for their early education initiative at higher rates than those set by the state CCDF lead agency for

most participating subsidy system providers. Georgia did this by setting a statewide cost per child figure according to education levels of the lead teacher in the classroom. Massachusetts allowed localities to determine provider rates based on market and cost of services.

- Requiring a set of quality program standards of all participating programs as a condition of funding—Each state has either adopted established federal Head Start standards (Ohio) or created an enhanced, separate set of early education standards that providers accepting initiative funding must meet (Georgia and Massachusetts).
- Encouraging advanced staffing qualifications across all participating programs—Each state has developed some consistent standards to be applied to the variety of providers receiving state funding. Examples include: requiring specific levels of higher education for lead teachers; requiring accreditation with the National Association of Family Child Care or a Child Development Associate (CDA) for family child care providers; and requiring child care programs to meet Head Start staff qualification requirements in Head Start/Child Care Partnerships.

4. Implementing Early Education Initiatives across Different Structures and Constituencies

The implementation of any cross-cutting early education initiative must address diverse expectations and outcomes among various groups. These groups include parents, policymakers, program administrators, and others. At the same time, the structures that house the various early education programs are in separate and non-parallel government entities. There is also a need to increase these different groups' and entities' understanding of other program and service delivery types.

State Responses:

- **Improving communication with parents and the public regarding early childhood education and new initiatives**—Communication strategies are dependent on the state's key mission in providing an initiative, what policymakers feel the public wants, technical capacity, and what the initiative actually offers. For example, Georgia requires all participating programs to use the same terminology about the program and has effectively "branded" the initiative, no matter where the classroom is housed (child care, Head Start, or public school).
- **Increasing the number and diversity of the state's constituency for early education issues**—For example, in Massachusetts every local region with an approved project has a decision-making council that includes membership of child care, Head Start, public school constituencies, and parents, and may include representatives of other key local stakeholder groups as well. The state estimates that over 3,000 individuals are involved in planning how best to meet the needs of children as a result of participating in the councils, which cover almost every town in the state.
- **Trying new formal and informal interagency structures to increase coordinated planning**—These methods, ranging from cabinet level to less formal interagency working groups and temporary joint projects on discrete issues, have had varying degrees of success. Such efforts at coordination are sometimes dependent on the personalities of the persons representing key agencies. Other barriers include lack of time or resources or the fact that the venture is not seen as a priority.
- **Appropriating new dollars that may only be used by those programs willing to work in partnerships or across systems**—Each of the study states used new funding as a "carrot" to encourage local programs to work across systems. Some states are also paying a higher rate for services provided in collaborative initiatives that meet higher standards. Thus, programs wish to participate not just to expand services, but to be able to have more flexibility with the funds or to be able to improve their services as a result of receiving more funding per child served.
- **Dedicating staff or resources to provide programs with technical assistance, which effectively doubles as a means to monitor implementation**—Each of the study states has developed staff capacity to work with providers to assure they are meeting the standards and goals of the state's early education initiative. In addition, states have established new policies and procedures to assist communities and providers, including: detailed grant applications and guidance; policy memorandum; technical assistance guides; and model joint agreements and contracts.
- **Allowing new local flexibility in use of funds to increase coordination**—Massachusetts and Ohio allowed flexibility to localities to address coordination issues. Massachusetts provided grants to local community councils that were representative of child care, Head Start, and public schools and allowed them to develop plans about how to work together to best serve the children in their community. Ohio developed partnership models and provided enhanced funding for state grantees willing to forge partnerships between Head Start and child care providers.

5. Tracking Progress and Measuring Results

With growing amounts of federal and state dollars targeted for early education, policymakers and the public are likely to demand a better picture of how funds are being spent and the resulting outcomes for children. Current data systems are not able to provide a picture across early care and education systems and initiatives. Substantive evaluations of program implementation and subsequent child outcomes are only beginning to emerge and rarely cut across program types in the early care and education system.

State Responses:

- **Increasing cross-cutting analysis capacity and upgrading data systems**—Each of the study states is beginning to think through methods of increasing the ability of data systems to "talk" to each other across programs, e.g. merging child care subsidy waiting list data with data on preschool children served through a separate agency.
- **Analyzing available data and publishing reports to better describe the state of early care and education across program types and funding streams**—Massachusetts has culled data from all the relevant state and federal agencies and presented it in a report that seeks to paint a picture of where children are currently served in the state and to discuss potential areas of need in early care and education. This type of comprehensive data gathering is unusual at the statewide level.
- **Basing new initiatives on available data and requiring baseline community needs assessments**—States are targeting expansion of early education initiatives according to available demographic data and community needs assessments regarding supply and demand.
- **Building in process or outcomes studies specific to the focus of the early education initiative**—Each state built in a study early on in the implementation of the state initiative aimed at testing aspects key to the success of the program, e.g. parent satisfaction, quality of cross-program partnerships. Each state is developing ways to measure longer term child outcomes as well.
- **Expressly measuring child outcomes across early education program types**—Massachusetts and Ohio have developed a process to gather data on children's progress as they participate in child care, Head Start, and prekindergarten settings and move into their school years.

RECOMMENDATIONS

While we find encouraging and promising approaches to collaboration among system segments in each of our study states, we believe that there is more that every state could do, and that there is an important federal role that is not currently being fulfilled. At present, states must commit extensive time, planning, and resources in order to increase coordination of services to better promote early learning and support parents' work needs. Yet this goal is increasingly on state political agendas. Accordingly, we have identified a set of recommendations for states and localities and for a potential federal role in supporting and promoting the development of comprehensive state initiatives.

- **Every state should establish an Early Care and Education Council** with required representation from the state child care agency, the state department of education, child care

providers, the state Head Start Collaboration Office, the Head Start Association, the public school system, the state child care resource and referral agencies, parents, employers, and other relevant agencies and community representatives. Statewide councils already in existence might be appropriate to carry out this recommendation. The early care and education community should be actively involved in state and local efforts to create a more cohesive system.

- The Council should conduct an Early Childhood Review, assessing all needs and resources for early childhood education in the state. In the review, states should assess their needs and resources across early childhood programs, including who is served with Head Start, prekindergarten, and child care funding, what supports are available to each type of program, and where the gaps in services across the state are. In addition, the Council should review state laws and procedures and develop recommendations to maximize opportunities to blend funding and work across programs to meet system goals.
- Based on the Early Childhood Review, each state should develop a multi-year State Strategic Plan, specifically identifying goals for developing a system of universal access to early care and education services for all families and specifying the action steps to be taken toward accomplishing those goals.
- The federal government should provide incentive funds to states to promote universal access to early care and education services in accordance with approved State Strategic Plans. New federal funds should be made available to states to promote better access to full-day, full-year early childhood programs serving children from birth to age five. As a condition of receiving these funds, states should be required to establish quality standards in key areas such as teacher qualifications, curriculum, and parent involvement. Funds should be used both for planning and to expand services and build upon existing child care, Head Start, and other existing early childhood programs. The newly authorized Early Learning Opportunities Act could serve as the vehicle for such an initiative.
- Head Start expansion should encourage collaboration, full-day and full-year services, and flexibility to serve children under age three. As more and more families enter the workforce, it has become critically important to promote full-day, full-year comprehensive services, particularly for low-income children. In addition, given the growing demand for care and education for infants and toddlers, expansion dollars should also be used to allow Head Start grantees to serve children under age three.
- At the federal level, an *Early Childhood Coordinating Initiative* should be established and should include the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (Head Start Bureau and Child Care Bureau) and the U.S. Department of Education (ED). While Head Start and child care should continue to be administered through HHS, it is important to establish a formal structure involving both HHS and ED in a systematic effort to address needs across the range of early childhood programs. Other agencies such as the U.S. Departments of Labor and Commerce (Census Bureau) should be asked to join the initiative as appropriate. Input from states and communities should help inform this effort.

- The Early Childhood Coordinating Initiative should encourage cross-program coordination and collaboration among Head Start, child care, and Department of Education-funded programs. Those areas should include: technical assistance; literacy promotion; developing and maintaining a qualified early education workforce and high-quality programs; coordinated data collection, system integration, and research; and identification of inconsistencies between federal funding streams and rules that have the effect of impeding coordination and collaboration in efforts to provide full-day, full-year comprehensive early education services.

The approach we propose in these recommendations recognizes and builds upon the accomplishments of recent years, the efforts already underway in states, and the simultaneous need for national goals and state flexibility. We believe these steps are needed to support an overall vision of an early care and education system responsive to both the education of young children and work support goals for all families.

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1. This table does not include funds spent on early care and education from some smaller federal sources, such as the Social Services Block Grant, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Even Start, or 21st Century Learning Centers. See the U.S. General Accounting Office report, *Early Childhood Programs and Services for Low-Income Families* (November 1999) for additional information.

2. See Head Start Bureau, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *2001 Head Start Fact Sheet*, online at www2.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/hsb/about/fact2001.htm.

3. Calculations by the Children's Defense Fund based on the above Head Start data and Census estimates of number of three- and four-year-old children under the poverty level in 2000.

4. See www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/ccb/policy1/archives/pi9804/chart.htm for 1999 funding data, and www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/ccb/policy1/misc/approp01.htm for 2001 data. Note that actual expenditures for FY99 may exceed appropriated levels, because a state may spend previous year CCDF dollars in the current year and a state may transfer up to 30 percent of TANF funds to CCDF.

5. See Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *New Statistics Show Only a Small Percentage of Eligible Families Receive Child Care Help*, press release, online at www.acf.dhhs.gov/new/cstudy.htm. This study was based on 1999 data.

6. See calculations by the Center for Law and Social Policy, *Use of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Block Grant for Child Care in Fiscal Years 1999 and 2000: Transfers to the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) and Direct Spending on Child Care*, online at www.clasp.org/pubs/childcare/tanf/ccfy99-00.pdf.

7. See Karen Shulman, Helen Blank, and Danielle Ewen, *Seeds of Success: State Prekindergarten Initiatives, 1998-1999* (Washington, DC: The Children's Defense Fund, 1999).

8. See U.S. General Accounting Office, *Title I Preschool Education: More Children Served, but Gauging Effect on School Readiness Difficult*, GAO/HEHS-00-171 (Washington, DC: U.S. General Accounting Office, 2000).

9. See Joint Committee on Taxation, *Estimates of Federal Tax Expenditures for Fiscal Years 2000-2004*, "Table 1.—Tax Expenditure Estimates by Budget Function, Fiscal Years 2000-2004" and "Table 3.—Distribution by Income Class of Selected Individual Tax Expenditure Items," at 1999 Rates and 1999 Income Levels, online at frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=2000_joint_committee_on_taxation&docid=f61287.wais.

State Prekindergarten Initiatives:

a varied picture

I believe my child has learned skills in school that will stay with him forever. Socially, he is on target. Emotionally, he is happy and a pleasure to be around. I can't tell you how good it feels to have my child come home and say, 'I'm special, I did good in school today.' The preschool program can mean the difference between a child going into school happy and ready for new challenges or frustrated and unprepared for his or her next twelve years.

—parent speaking about the Colorado Preschool Program

the growing awareness of the importance of quality early care and education experiences to a child's later development has spurred a considerable increase in state investments in prekindergarten over the past decade, according to *Seeds of Success: State Prekindergarten Initiatives, 1998-99*, a publication of the Children's Defense Fund. Since 1991-92, state spending on prekindergarten initiatives expanded by nearly \$1 billion—from approximately \$700 million to nearly \$1.7 billion in 1998-99, or almost two-and-a-half times as much as at the beginning of the decade. The number of children participating in state-funded prekindergarten programs increased proportionally, from approximately 290,000 to nearly 725,000. Since the report's publication in 2000, there have been additional modest increases in states' investments in prekindergarten and consequently the number of children being served.

**by Karen Schulman
& Helen Blank**

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"This program is a great way for my child to meet future classmates, to learn new vocabulary each week, and to become more observant of his world."

—Minnesota parent speaking about the state's Learning Readiness initiative



Research throughout the decade has shown that high-quality prekindergarten programs are particularly important for children in low-income families, who often lack access to experiences and resources that promote their successful development. Several evaluations of state prekindergarten initiatives also offer convincing evidence of the benefits of early education for children at risk of school failure. Children who had participated in the initiatives had higher math and reading scores, stronger learning skills, increased creativity, better school attendance, improved health, and greater involvement of their parents in their education. These and other studies bolster the case for prekindergarten and fuel the growth in state investments.¹

A Blueprint for Quality Prekindergarten Initiatives

As states attempt to meet the need for prekindergarten, they can take one of many approaches. However, there are key components that are essential if prekindergarten programs are to be able to offer a high-quality early education experience to every child who needs it. A strong prekindergarten initiative is one where:

- Sufficient financial and technical resources are provided to support quality prekindergarten.

- At least two years of high-quality, comprehensive prekindergarten is available for every preschool-age child who needs it. Prekindergarten is available in as many communities as possible, especially low-income communities. Prekindergarten is also available in a range of settings, including child care, Head Start, and public schools. Clear guidelines and regular monitoring visits are provided to ensure that all children are cared for in environments that protect their health and safety, and are offered expe-

riences that help them develop to their full potential. Facilities are safe and tailored to the needs of young children; class sizes are small and child:teacher ratios are low; staff members are highly qualified and well compensated; children and families are provided with comprehensive supports, including nutrition, health care, and social services; and parents have extensive opportunities to be involved in their children's prekindergarten experience. Prekindergarten is accessible to all children, including those who may need full-day/full-year programs because their parents work, those who do not speak English as their primary language, those with disabilities or special needs, and those whose families lack access to their own means of transportation.

- Prekindergarten is integrated with other early childhood programs and resources. Local communities have the opportunities and incentives to coordinate their prekindergarten resources with other early childhood programs. State agencies also collaborate throughout all stages of developing and implementing the initiative to make efficient use of limited resources.

State Efforts to Meet the Blueprint

"This program is a great way for my child to meet future classmates, to learn new vocabulary each week, and to become more observant of his world. It made him a better thinker!"

—Minnesota parent speaking about the state's Learning Readiness initiative

A total of 41 states invested in state prekindergarten initiatives in 1998-99. These initiatives are similar in that they all offer a regularly scheduled group experience for young children to help



them learn and develop before entering elementary school. However, in numerous other ways, they are very different.* In designing its initiative, a state may:

- Create its own program, or build on the federal Head Start model.
- Limit programs to public school settings, or offer programs in a variety of settings, including Head Start and child care.
- Set standards that help ensure a high-quality experience for children, or require programs to meet only minimal state child care licensing regulations or school codes.
- Offer an education-focused experience that is much like kindergarten, or take a comprehensive approach in meeting children's full range of nutritional, health care, and social services needs.
- Support a part-day program, or support full-day programs to meet the needs of parents working full-time.

While states have adopted a variety of approaches, most are taking at least some steps to make high-quality prekindergarten available and accessible for families. A number of states have developed particularly innovative strategies and made significant investments so that early education experiences are available for young children, especially those most at risk of school failure. Yet many gaps remain both in terms of the number of children reached and the quality of experiences they receive.

*The states are Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Vermont, Virginia, Washington, West Virginia, and Wisconsin, along with the District of Columbia. In 2000, Nevada began a very small prekindergarten initiative.

The Availability of Prekindergarten

Three-quarters of spending on prekindergarten in 1998-99 was concentrated in just ten states (California, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, and Texas), even though these states accounted for only about one-half of the preschool-age population in the United States. In most states, spending is insufficient to provide prekindergarten to all children who need it, or even a significant proportion of these children. Spending per pupil is also too low to enable programs to provide a high level of quality.

Is Prekindergarten Available to Children Who Need It?

Only Georgia both establishes eligibility policies and invests sufficient funds to make prekindergarten available to *all* children whose families want them to participate. Oklahoma provides funding to every local school district who wishes to participate, and New York has plans to move to universal prekindergarten. Most of the remaining states limit eligibility for their initiatives to children in low-income families and children with other risk factors. Yet even these states are still generally unable to serve all eligible children. Tennessee's initiative serves only two percent of eligible children, and Massachusetts' initiative serves less than one-quarter of eligible children. Some states are making efforts to provide prekindergarten to all low-income children. For example, in Ohio, the combination of the state and federal resources allows the state to provide a Head Start early childhood experience for nearly nine out of ten children in poverty. In New Jersey the settlement of a 1996 school finance equity lawsuit (*Abbott v. Burke*) requires the state to provide funds for low-income school districts to extend part-day kindergarten to full-day for five-year olds and offer half-day prekindergarten for three- and four-year-olds.

Although children benefit from having a stable early childhood experience over an extended period of time, 18 state initiatives do not permit children to be eligible for more than a year. Both three- and four-year-olds are eligible for 31 state initiatives, but many of these states still primarily serve four-year-olds. Eight states serve an even broader age group—for example, children from birth to age five.

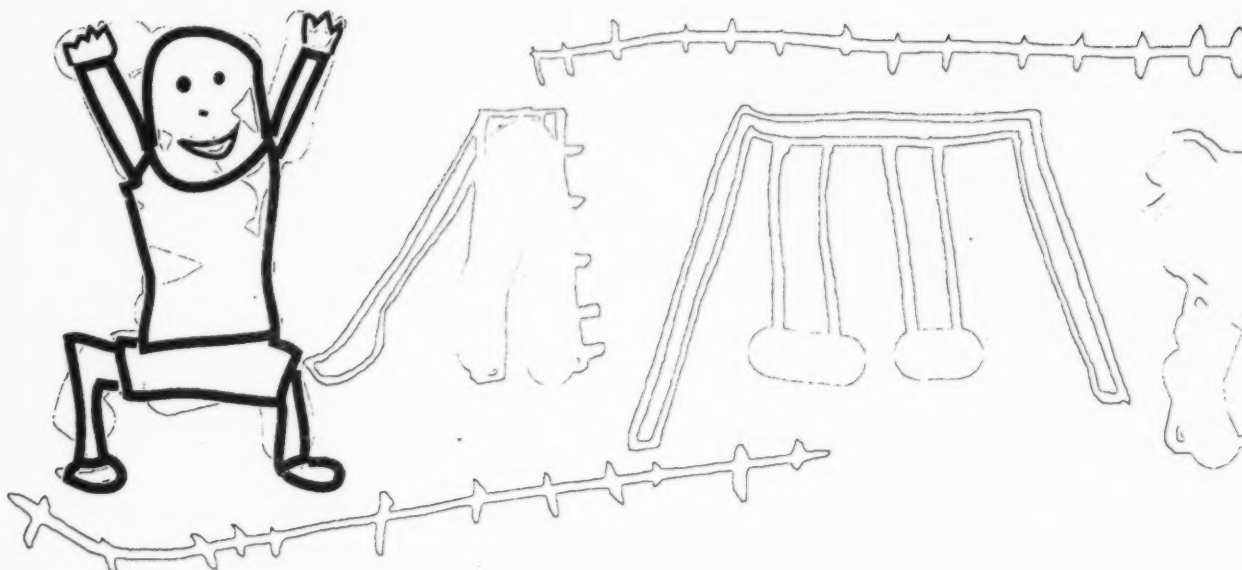
Is Prekindergarten Available in a Range of Settings?

The majority of states allow a broad range of providers, including child care programs and Head Start agencies, to offer prekindergarten. This enables communities to take advantage of existing resources and provides them with the flexibility both to meet their overall need for prekindergarten and to respond to the diverse needs of their children and families. In some states, a particularly wide array of agencies operate programs. For example, Arkansas provides direct funding to public schools, Head Start centers, non-profit child care centers, home-based sites, educational cooperative sites, and universities, as well as the Arkansas Children's Hospital.

"My son is definitely learning.

**The curriculum is full of wonderful
books, music, and activities."**

—Georgia parent speaking about the state's universally available prekindergarten program



Seven states—Kansas, Louisiana, Maine, New York, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and Wisconsin—and the District of Columbia have initiatives where only schools may operate programs.²

Are Efforts Made to Ensure the Availability of Facilities?

While the availability of prekindergarten depends on having an adequate supply of safe, high-quality facilities, most states do not provide targeted funding for this purpose. Two exceptions are Connecticut and Massachusetts, which invest extensively in building, expanding, and renovating facilities.

The Quality of Prekindergarten

"My son is definitely learning. The curriculum is full of wonderful books, music, and activities. When he comes home, he wants more and is bored watching television. He is already beginning to read."

—Georgia parent speaking about the state's universally available prekindergarten program

Most states have adopted quality standards that address at least some of the essential components necessary for ensuring that prekindergarten contributes to children's healthy and safe development and prepares them for school. Unfortunately, in some states, standards fail to adequately address certain important

aspects of quality—such as basic classroom quality components (including child:staff ratios and class size), comprehensive services, or parent involvement—or do not require monitoring to verify that programs are implementing the required standards.

Quality Standards

A number of states have developed quality standards based on Head Start Performance Standards or accreditation criteria, including six states that require programs to have or work toward accreditation. Yet 11 state initiatives have only minimal quality requirements, often consisting primarily of child care licensing requirements and/or school codes—neither of which offers sufficient assurance that children will receive a high-quality experience—with perhaps only a few additional requirements.

Basic Classroom Quality

The large majority of states establish requirements to ensure that children have a quality classroom experience. They require teachers to have credentials demonstrating a background in early childhood education and, in several instances, assist teachers in attaining those credentials. For example, New York and New Jersey fund scholarships, Connecticut supports professional development through its Charts-A-Course initiative, and Maryland provides intensive training for prekindergarten teachers and other early childhood professionals through its Model for School Readiness project. Most states also set maximum class size and child:teacher

ratios at levels recommended by early childhood experts—no more than 20 children per class and no more than 10 children per teacher. Yet 16 state initiatives do not set any class size requirements, and 10 state initiatives fail to limit child:teacher ratios.

Comprehensive Services

"Through a screening performed by ECEAP [Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program], it was discovered that my daughter had been born hearing impaired. She had compensated by whatever means so that no one ever suspected she had a problem. After being referred to her doctor for further testing, she was fitted for hearing aides and immediately placed in speech therapy."

—Washington, DC parent

Preparing children to enter school entails not only helping them develop early learning skills, but also addressing the physical, emotional, and social problems that many children face that can interfere with their ability to succeed in school and in life. A child will have a difficult time concentrating and learning in school if he is hungry, had no place to sleep the night before, has an undiagnosed hearing or vision problem, is repeatedly absent from school due to illness, or if his family is in crisis.

While a few state prekindergarten initiatives have detailed guidelines requiring programs to provide comprehensive nutrition, health, and social services, many states do not thoroughly address all of these supports. Eighteen state initiatives that build on the federal Head Start program as well as three separate initiatives (New York's Experimental Prekindergarten Program, Ohio's Public Preschool, and Washington, DC's Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program) have strong comprehensive services requirements that are the same or similar to Head Start Performance Standards. A number of other states have some requirements that address comprehensive services or strongly encourage programs to provide them. However, 14 states do not establish any requirements or offer any encouragement for programs to provide comprehensive services.

Parent Involvement, Education, and Support

"Due to the program, I have seen the necessity for parent participation in the education of our children, and plan to continue an active role throughout my children's school years."

—parent speaking about the Colorado Preschool Program

Research demonstrates that making parent-focused efforts an integral part of prekindergarten helps children succeed, strengthens parent-child relationships, and enables parents to improve their own lives.⁹ As a result, most states require or encourage programs to reach out to parents, providing them with opportunities to be involved with their children's education, learn more about their children's development, and/or obtain the help they need to better support their families. However, this does not necessarily mean that parents are fully included and involved in every aspect

of a state's prekindergarten program. Several states have particularly strong parent-focused efforts. Nine states require that parents be included on councils overseeing programs. Georgia provides \$17 million in supplemental grants for family support activities in programs serving high numbers of at-risk children. In Wisconsin, programs that provide outreach to parents are reimbursed by the state at a rate that is 20 percent higher than the standard reimbursement rate.

Monitoring

No matter how comprehensive a prekindergarten initiative's standards are, states cannot ensure that programs achieve positive results without regularly scheduled monitoring visits. However, 21 state prekindergarten initiatives either fail to require any state-level monitoring or only require written reports from programs, but not on-site visits to observe classrooms.

The Accessibility of Prekindergarten

Families often face a number of practical barriers that can prevent their children from participating in prekindergarten initiatives. A program may not offer a full-day schedule for working parents, may not have staff who speak the family's language, or may not provide transportation. Some states have been more successful than others in taking steps to eliminate these barriers.

Meeting the Needs of Working Parents

State prekindergarten initiatives are generally structured to provide part-day/part-year programs. This schedule obviously fails to take into account the needs of parents working full time. Thirty-seven initiatives generally support only part-day classes of about 2½ to 4 hours a day. Seven states have prekindergarten initiatives where programs primarily operate on a school-day schedule of about 5 to 7 hours a day. Only two states—Massachusetts and Connecticut—fund and require programs to provide full-day/full-year programs for at least a certain proportion of their families.

While most states do not require or directly fund full-day programs, there are increasing efforts to address this issue, primarily through coordination with other resources and programs. One way to support a longer day is to locate prekindergarten initiatives in child care programs. Maine promotes partnerships between Head Start and child care that allow programs to offer a full-day schedule. The state has helped foster the partnerships by combining its Head Start and child care offices into a single agency and by giving priority to partnerships in distributing child care funds. Maryland allows programs to use some of the expansion funding from a broader school reform effort for extending the length of the program day. The state also helps parents by disseminating resource and referral information about child care to all prekindergarten sites. New York and Georgia have a significant number of their prekindergarten programs located in community-based organizations such as child care centers, ensuring that full-day care is available to families.

Removing Other Barriers to Access

"This year there were two Down Syndrome children who were in different prekindergarten classes. Neither child was verbal at the beginning of the year. By the end of the year, both children had become outgoing, were loved by their classmates, and had become very verbal. Being in the language-rich and social environment of a prekindergarten class was exactly what each child needed."

—Georgia Prekindergarten Regional Consultant

Accessibility to prekindergarten is not only determined by funding levels, but also by the extent of efforts to help families and children overcome other obstacles that can prevent them from taking advantage of prekindergarten programs. For example, state-funded Head Start models require programs to provide transportation, but only six of the other state initiatives have transportation requirements. Lack of transportation assistance makes it difficult for the many families who have neither their own vehicles nor access to public transportation to take advantage of prekindergarten programs.

Seven state prekindergarten initiatives, as well as state-funded Head Start models, have strong provisions that address the needs of children and families who do not speak English as their primary language. In a number of other states, programs are not required to respond to the language needs of their children and families.

States are also working to make their prekindergarten initiatives accessible to children with disabilities and other special needs. They coordinate their prekindergarten initiatives with other programs and resources to allow these children to be served in integrated settings and ensure that they have any necessary supplementary supports.

The Integration of Prekindergarten with Other Early Childhood Resources

Collaborative efforts at the state and local levels enable state prekindergarten initiatives to be coordinated with the federal Head Start program and child care programs, as well as with other programs focused on children and families. This helps states to use existing resources more efficiently as they strive to make comprehensive, quality early childhood supports available.

At least 23 states require some form of local collaboration on early childhood programs. Connecticut, Massachusetts, and New York have incorporated particularly strong requirements for local planning directly into their prekindergarten initiatives. In addition, more than three out of four states with prekindergarten initiatives indicated that they have some type of state-level efforts to coordinate the prekindergarten initiative with other early childhood programs. These interagency coordination efforts range from joint planning in the initial stages of developing a prekindergarten initiative, to sharing of information about the children and families the various agencies serve and the programs they fund, to joint sponsoring of trainings or

conferences, to joint funding for comprehensive services, to interagency councils for addressing ongoing concerns.

Further Steps in Supporting Prekindergarten Are Essential

In the past decade, states have made significant progress toward the goal of enabling all children to enter school ready to succeed. However, there is still much work to be done. Too many children lack access to a quality prekindergarten program. Too many programs are not structured to meet the varied needs of children and families. Not every state initiative has the quality requirements in place to ensure that children receive a successful early education experience. In the next decade, states should move forward to build on their investments and expand their commitment to early learning so that every child in every state receives the strong start he or she needs to succeed.

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The complete report, *Seeds of Success: State Prekindergarten Initiatives, 1998-99*, is available from the Children's Defense Fund for \$9.95, plus postage. To order a copy, contact CDF's Publication Department by mail at 25 E Street, NW, Washington, DC 20001, by phone at 202-662-3643, or through its website at www.childrensdefense.org.

1. For example, a review of nine early intervention programs targeted to at-risk children found that the programs had positive impacts on children's emotional and cognitive development, educational performance, and health (L.A. Karoly, et al., *Investing in Our Children: What We Know and Don't Know about the Costs and Benefits of Early Childhood Intervention* [Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1998]). A study of the long-term impact of a quality prekindergarten program for low-income children found that after 27 years, each \$1.00 invested saved over \$7.00 by increasing the likelihood that children would be literate, employed, and enrolled in postsecondary education and by making them less likely to be school dropouts, dependent on welfare, or arrested for criminal activity or delinquency (Schweinhart and Weikart, *Significant Benefits: The HighScope Perry Preschool Study through Age 27* [Ypsilanti, MI: HighScope Educational Research Foundation, 1992]).

2. While these states have initiatives that provide funding only to public schools, four of them have a second initiative that does fund agencies outside the public schools. Kansas, Maine, and Wisconsin have Head Start models that provide state funding to federal Head Start agencies, and New York has a universal prekindergarten initiative that requires participation by agencies other than public schools.

3. See, for example: U.S. Department of Education, *Strong Families, Strong Schools: Key Research Findings* (1994), online at eric-web.tc.columbia.edu/families/strong/key_research.html; Judy A. Temple, Arthur J. Reynolds, and Wendy T. Miedel, *Can Early Intervention Prevent High School Dropout? Evidence from the Chicago Child-Parent Centers* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin-Madison, Institute for Research on Poverty, 1998); Rebecca A. Marcon, "The DC Study: A Longitudinal Look at Children's Development and Achievement under Varying Educational and Familial Conditions," paper presented at the Head Start Third National Research Conference, Washington, DC, June 20-23, 1996; Hirokazu Yoshikawa, "Long-Term Effects of Early Childhood Programs on Social Outcomes and Delinquency," *The Future of Children* 5, no. 3 (Winter 1995): 51-75; Robert G. St. Pierre, Jean I. Layzer, and Helen V. Barnes, "Two-Generation Programs: Design, Cost, and Short-Term Effectiveness," *The Future of Children* 5, no. 3 (Winter 1995): 76-93; and Anita Lightburn, *Hall Neighborhood Head Start Family Support Program Demonstration 1990-1993*, paper presented at the Head Start Second National Research Conference, Washington, DC, November 4-7, 1993.

Early Childhood Education

Program Accreditation and State Policies

MANY OF THE SAME TRENDS THAT PROMPTED THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR THE Education of Young Children (NAEYC) to develop its accreditation system in the early 1980s continue today: increased demand for services; the lack of a system that supports high quality; and the lack of information to assist families in choosing the appropriate program for their young children. For many families, good child care is financially out of reach, and overall, programs are of low quality. This situation, combined with the inadequate financing of early childhood education as a system and not just services, has been a barrier to implementing the practices and programs that research shows will help young children be ready for success in school and beyond.

Program accreditation is an important part, though only one part, of the range of policies, incentives, resources, and funding that are needed to improve early childhood education. After a brief overview of the status of child care and education programs in the United States today, this article reviews the need for and history of early childhood program accreditation. It then places accreditation in the context of overall state policies for early childhood education and concludes with a number of policy recommendations that can help move this complex system toward higher quality programs for all children and their families.

THE CONTEXT

Thirteen million infants, toddlers, and preschool-age children are in child care, yet our nation's commitment to children and their early childhood development and education pales in comparison to that of many other nations. The United States is one of the few western countries without a publicly supported system of early childhood education and paid parental leave.¹ Yet the demand for early childhood care and education programs continues to increase not only in response to the growing demand for out-of-home child care, but also in recognition of the critical importance of educational experiences during the early years.

by Adele Robinson

Families suffer not only from lack of access to affordable programs, but also from a lack of quality programs. Studies following children into the early grades and beyond have shown that children who attend high-quality child care have better literacy, math, and behavior skills and lower juvenile delinquency and drop-out rates.² But even with research showing the benefits for children when they attend high-quality early childhood programs, public financing for most child care and other early learning programs remains inadequate.³

At the same time, states generally set very low standards for licensing programs, and many states exempt certain kinds of programs from having to be licensed.⁴ Although a key component of program quality is the qualifications of the teacher, 31 states do not require providers to have any training in early childhood education before they can care for children in center-based programs, and 30 states have no such requirement for family child care providers.⁵ Forty-four states require center-based teachers to have ongoing training each year (though limited to a few hours), but only 11 states require professional development training annually for small family child care providers.⁶

Another factor directly related to quality is compensation. Today, child care teachers in centers average only \$15,000 a year in salary.⁷ Less than one-third have access to employer-sponsored health insurance. Such grossly inadequate compensation results in an annual staff turnover rate of 30 percent a year. But because most of the cost of child care is connected to salaries and because child care is financed largely through parent fees (60 percent of the cost of child care funding), increasing quality would mean increasing the cost that parents must pay. Yet parents already spend more on child care than the average cost of attending a public college or university, and for most working families not much more can be squeezed out. It is clear that given the need to recruit and to retain qualified staff and professionals, improving the quality of early childhood education will require a significant infusion of public dollars for compensation.⁸

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION ACCREDITATION

Accreditation in early childhood education is relatively new compared to accreditation for higher education and K-12 schools. Early childhood program accreditation is a voluntary system to promote and assist in raising child care program quality well beyond the licensing requirements set by states. It can be a very powerful program improvement tool because it provides a process through which professionals and families can evaluate programs in relation to professional standards and identify areas that need to be upgraded. Programs that complete the accreditation process make the changes necessary to demonstrate their substantial compliance with the standards and are rewarded by the public recognition they receive as an accredited program.

NAEYC began accreditation of early childhood programs in child care centers, preschool, kindergartens, and before- and after-school programs in 1985.⁹ Since then, the rate of growth has exploded. As of this spring, nearly 8,000 programs are accredited, and another 8,000 programs are in self-study. A program seeking

One positive example of systemic changes to child care access and quality is the U.S. military child care system. In the late 1980s, the military recognized that its own recruitment and retention viability was threatened because military families did not have access to affordable, quality child care.¹⁰ Congress stepped in and reinvented the military child care system, using standards to ensure quality and financing based on adequate public dollars and affordable fees for families. One of the key components of the new system is the requirement that all U.S. military child care programs obtain accreditation, with NAEYC's accreditation selected as the standard for centers.

accreditation engages in three steps: (1) extensive self-study based on NAEYC-established standards; (2) a site visit to verify the self-study by a team of trained volunteer validators; and (3) a review of the validation team's findings (including the program director's responses) by a three-member national commission composed of recognized experts in child care and early childhood education, which results in a judgment of whether the program is in substantial compliance with the accreditation standards. The grant of accreditation is for a three-year period. An accredited program must apply for re-accreditation and complete the same three-stage process. If determined to not be in substantial compliance, the program is deferred with the option of submitting to a second validation and commission process.

Accreditation serves two very critical purposes. First, it supports the continuous improvement of programs and ongoing professional development of program staff to raise the quality of services that children receive. Second, it provides information to families to help them make informed choices about their children's early childhood education arrangements.

Increasingly, states are using accreditation in their child care and state-funded prekindergarten policies. Twelve states, along with the District of Columbia, Chicago, Cincinnati, and Kansas City, Missouri, require early childhood education program accreditation to receive funds.¹¹ Seven states require their state-funded prekindergarten programs to pursue and attain accreditation.¹² In Wisconsin, for example, accreditation is a standard in the Quality Improvement Grants program. The U.S. Department of Defense and the U.S. General Services Administration require programs that they fund to attain accreditation. Of the twenty-five states with a tiered reimbursement system for child care, twenty-one link higher rates to accreditation.¹³

QUESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY-MAKERS PROMOTING ACCREDITATION

Because it represents achievement of professional standards, accreditation is a useful quality benchmark and accountability

measure. In examining policies to promote and sustain accreditation status of more programs, policymakers must also keep in mind that the ultimate goal is improving the quality of all programs for young children. Many states are now providing higher reimbursement rates to child care providers that are accredited. However, state policies that rely solely on rewards to programs that achieve accreditation can lead to unintended consequences that may make it difficult to raise all programs to a higher level of quality and to sustain quality and accreditation status. Instead, state policies should promote the ability of all programs to (1) pursue; (2) attain; and (3) sustain accreditation. All three aspects need policies and resources to provide equitable access to high-quality early childhood education programs for all children.

In doing so, states must pay attention to the other system needs that support high quality and accreditation: teacher preparation and ongoing training; increased compensation to recruit and retain qualified educators and staff; local planning councils to plan and coordinate services and resources; resource and referral agencies to provide technical assistance and public information; and support for programs pursuing national accreditation. In addition to leaving no children behind, states and localities must ensure that no provider is left without the resources and support to reach high-quality standards, too.

In moving forward with policies that promote program accreditation, issues of equity and access for both families and providers must be in the forefront of the policy decisions. Policymakers may ask:

- Do the policies help all families have access to high-quality programs?
- Do the policies help all providers reach high standards of quality?
- Do the policies not only promote accreditation, but also all of the elements of quality recognized by accreditation criteria, such as staff preparation and ongoing professional development; appropriate adult:child ratios; developmentally appropriate practices; and healthy and safe facilities?
- Does the financing of early childhood programs meet the goals of universal access to quality and to sustaining the high quality of programs without requiring additional parent fees?

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EFFECTIVE PUBLIC POLICIES

The following public policy recommendations are based on current knowledge about accreditation, how it operates as part of the overall infrastructure supporting childhood care and education services, and how it can be used to promote equity for families and for programs in ensuring that all children have access to high-quality early childhood education.¹⁴

Support and build on a strong regulatory system and do not replace regulation with accreditation.

Program regulation and program accreditation are complementary, and both are needed to advance excellence in child care pro-

grams. The voluntary professional standards set by accrediting bodies build on mandatory state standards; they are not a substitute for strong licensing requirements. An effective regulatory system sets standards and monitors programs' compliance with the standards to ensure that all children are protected from harm in early childhood and school-age care settings. An effective accreditation system sets high standards for professional practice and engages programs in a continuous process of improvement to provide high-quality services. In fact, several researchers have found that providers in states with low standards or inadequate monitoring systems have more difficulty achieving accreditation standards.¹⁵

Promote an overall plan for improving the system of childhood education.

To make improvements in the overall system of childhood care and education services, significantly more resources and more coordinated efforts that provide for greater involvement of the private sector are needed, as well as collaboration between service agencies and organizations at all levels of government. The number of accredited programs and the number of subsidized and non-subsidized children enrolled in them can be used to help measure a state's progress in building opportunities for children. Achievement of accreditation means that a program has demonstrated substantial compliance with accreditation standards and deserves recognition as a good program. However, it does not mean that the program has completed the process of making program improvements. NAEYC believes accreditation is an ongoing process of striving for excellence. Similarly, programs in the middle of a self-study process may take significant steps to improve their quality, such as recruiting highly qualified professionals or upgrading their equipment, even though they have not yet achieved accreditation.

Identify the criteria that national accrediting bodies must meet to recognize them as part of a public policy strategy to raise program quality and to finance the system.

Specifically, each accrediting body should be able to document that it meets the following criteria:

1. Standards are based on research about program quality and outcomes for children that are periodically reviewed and updated with input from diverse stakeholders and a variety of experts;
2. The process includes a system for comprehensive self-evaluation, on-site peer review by one or more well-trained professionals, expert evaluation, a time-limited award of accreditation, and a comprehensive renewal process;
3. The instruments and training procedures have documented reliability and validity; and
4. Administrative policies and system evaluation procedures are in place to avoid conflicts of interest and to reassess a program's compliance with accreditation criteria when major changes occur, complaints are filed, or deferred programs wish to appeal the accreditation decision.

Ensure adequate funding to cover the costs of pursuing accreditation, making the improvements that will help programs meet accreditation standards, and the ongoing costs of maintaining high-quality services, including equitable staff compensation.

Given the inadequate funding and financing that characterize the delivery of many early childhood and school-age services, the costs associated with making improvements to meet and maintain accreditation standards can be a burden.

High-quality program costs are significant and include facility improvement costs and higher personnel costs needed to improve staff:child ratios and ensure highly qualified professionals with equitable compensation. Small financial incentives to accredited programs do little to enhance accredited programs' ongoing ability to pay for the costs of providing high-quality services or to ensure that more programs will be able to achieve high standards of practice. In addition, when financial support is limited to accredited programs and no funds are available to programs to make quality improvements to achieve accreditation, issues of equity arise as the gulf is widened between the haves (those programs that can readily achieve accreditation) and the have-nots (those programs for which accreditation is out of reach). Greater pressure is placed on programs to make temporary improvements or hide deficiencies to achieve accreditation, and while more programs may engage in the process, their success in improving services is likely to be limited.

Provide a variety of resources to meet the diverse needs of teachers, directors, owners, parents, and advisory boards and councils involved in the process of creating a well-financed, high-quality early childhood education system that includes making program improvements to meet accreditation criteria.

Program accreditation is often initiated by a single person such as the program director or a group such as the parent advisory committee who believe it is a worthwhile activity. However, to complete the process, all teachers, directors, owners, parents, and advisory boards need to be committed to spending a large amount of time and energy in the process. Because it is a complex process that involves lasting change and often requires significant improvements, extrinsic motivation including financial incentives may not be sufficient to achieve accreditation. Providers can easily become overwhelmed by the process and often need resources and training to educate and motivate all those involved, familiarize themselves with accreditation materials, conduct a self-evaluation, develop and implement a strategic plan, make necessary changes, and document their practices for peer review and expert evaluation.

Because of the diversity of program providers, it is important to offer a variety of resources and training and allow program providers to choose the support strategy that works best for them. These resources can include, but are not limited to, quality improvement grants, training workshops, facilitation projects,

NAEYC NATIONAL COMMISSION ON ACCREDITATION REINVENTION

Fifteen years after the launch of the National Academy of Early Childhood Programs, the newly created NAEYC National Commission on Accreditation Reinvention has begun to outline strategies to advance the next era of NAEYC's accreditation system. The NAEYC Governing Board has charged the 12-member commission, together with NAEYC staff, to envision a future in which NAEYC's accreditation system accelerates the nation's quality improvement agenda for early childhood programs.

The commission's task requires a contemporary vision for and innovative approaches to accreditation of early care and education programs. Anticipating the future and contemplating strategies that will confirm NAEYC's accreditation system as a force for program quality requires thoughtful, analytic, and inventive deliberation.

For more information on NAEYC's accreditation system and other work, please visit the association's website at www.naeyc.org.

peer support and mentoring projects, technical assistance, and expert consultations.

Link to an overall plan for supporting the creation of a highly qualified, stable early childhood care professional workforce.

Key components of the plan should include strengthening teacher preparation and ongoing professional development programs; supporting individuals' efforts to earn related college degrees; developing initiatives that provide higher compensation and better working conditions for all professionals, with special incentives to support professionals who have achieved higher levels of education and training; and creating systems to track individuals' professional achievement, such as professional licensing or career ladders.

In areas with good professional development systems and strong regulations related to professional qualifications, caregivers, teachers, and program directors are better able to meet the high professional standards required for program accreditation. When good teacher preparation programs and ongoing professional development opportunities are not available, or when professional qualifications are not required, providers have more trouble achieving accreditation. Closely linked to the issue of professional qualifications is the issue of compen-

sation. Inadequate compensation is associated with high rates of turnover and lower program quality, which are antithetical to achieving accreditation. Inadequate compensation and its related turnover also make it difficult to maintain the level of quality required by accreditation over time.

Increase public awareness about the importance of program quality in supporting children's healthy development and early learning.

The public must understand the link between children's healthy development and learning and good early childhood programs to create a demand for better care. All parents want the best for their children, but many do not know that program accreditation is a sign of good programs. The more parents demand to know whether a program is in compliance with licensing requirements and whether it has achieved program accreditation or is in the process of becoming accredited, the greater the incentive for program providers to meet state standards and pursue program accreditation. Wider public recognition of the importance of good early childhood and school-age care programs in supporting children's development and learning can stimulate quality improvements within the overall field.

CONCLUSION

While policies to promote early childhood and school-age care program accreditation are necessary, it is also true that accreditation is but one element of a comprehensive system for quality care and education. An increase in the number of programs that obtain accreditation by itself must not be construed as a solution to all the problems facing the field. To effectively impact outcomes for children, public policies promoting accreditation must be based on an understanding of how accreditation operates within the overall system. The accreditation policy recommendations presented in this article are intended for all stakeholders—that is, the entire community—because everyone has a role in improving the quality of children's early experiences.

Policymakers must focus on integrating accreditation policies into a comprehensive plan to build a well-financed system that supports proven quality improvement efforts, ensures the protection of children from harm, and promotes equitable access to high-quality programs. Accrediting bodies must continue to refine their standards and practices to preserve the integrity of their system. They need to collaborate with each other, with researchers, and with practitioners to respond to the demand for new outcomes-based accountability measures and to help inform the public of the benefits of accreditation.

Our nation can and must do better to create opportunities that help all children and families succeed. The time for action is now.

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4. NAEYC Position Statement on Licensing and Public Regulation of Early Childhood Programs (1997).

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9. To learn more about NAEYC accreditation, see materials published by NAEYC: *Accreditation Criteria and Procedures of the National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998 Edition; Guide to Accreditation by the National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998 Edition*; Sue Bredekamp and Barbara Willer, eds., *NAEYC Accreditation: A Decade of Learning and the Years Ahead* (1996); *Early Childhood Program Accreditation: A Commitment to Excellence* (1997).

10. Nancy D. Campbell, Judith C. Appelbaum, K. Martinson, and E. Martin, *Be All that We Can Be: Lessons from the Military for Improving Our Nation's Child Care System* (Washington, DC: National Women's Law Center, 2000).

11. L. Stoney and J. Daugherty, "Reinventing NAEYC Accreditation: A Public Policy Perspective" (paper prepared for the NAEYC National Commission on Accreditation Reinvention, April 2000).

12. NAEYC does not accredit family group home child care programs. Other national accrediting bodies include the National Association of Family Child Care; Association of Christian Schools International; National Accreditation Commission for Early Care and Education Programs (accepted in Ohio); the National School-Age Care Alliance (in twelve states); National Early Childhood Program Accreditation (nine states); Council on Accreditation of Services for Children and Families, which accredits family service and child welfare agencies (in six states); and the National Accreditation Council for Early Childhood Professional Personnel and Programs and the Florida Association for Child Care Management, both of which are accepted in Florida.

13. Child care programs eligible to receive public subsidies, through contracts or vouchers, are reimbursed based on current market rates rather than the cost of providing care and education. Most rates are set extremely low, making it difficult for parents to afford quality programs and for programs to pay for the costs associated with quality, such as higher teacher compensation, smaller adult:child ratios, and more professional development. Nearly half of the states have differential reimbursement rates, also known as tiered reimbursement.

14. These recommendations are derived from the NAEYC Position Statement on Developing and Implementing Effective Public Policies to Promote Early Childhood and School-Age Care Program Accreditation (1999).

15. See S. Helburn, ed., *Cost, Quality, and Child Outcomes in Child Care Centers, Technical Report* (Denver, CO: Department of Economics, Center for Research in Economic and Social Policy, University of Colorado Denver, 1995); L. Harris, G. Morgan, and P. Sprague, "Facilitated Accreditation Project," in NAEYC *Accreditation: A Decade of Learning and the Years Ahead*, ed. Sue Bredekamp and Barbara Willer (Washington, DC: NAEYC, 1996), 83-96.

EVALUATING **SMART START**

As recognition of the importance of young children's early life experiences grows, many states are investing in child development and family support initiatives for children under age six. Sometimes the initiatives focus on specific age groups, such as infants and toddlers or four-year-olds; in other cases, they focus on a specific strategy, such as prekindergarten or increasing the education of child care teachers. However, many new initiatives recognize the complexity of children's problems and offer a multi-component, comprehensive approach to solving the problems, with North Carolina, California, Kentucky, and South Carolina singled out as the states that are the most comprehensive.¹ Many state initiatives also claim to be "reinventing government" by setting broad goals and allowing local community members to decide how best to meet those goals, instead of forcing communities to follow state-developed strategies.²

This article describes the North Carolina Early Childhood Initiative, better known as Smart Start, and several of the studies that have shown improvements being made by the initiative. Central questions have focused on whether child care quality was improving, whether families were becoming more involved with their children's lives, whether health care and immunizations were more available, and, most importantly, whether these improvements were helping kindergartners enter school more healthy and ready to succeed.



OVERVIEW OF THE SMART START INITIATIVE

Smart Start was established by Governor James Hunt and the state General Assembly in 1993 as a partnership between state government and local leaders, service providers, and families to better serve children under six and their families. The primary goal of Smart Start is to ensure that all children enter school healthy and prepared to succeed. To achieve this goal, 81 local partnerships encompassing all of North Carolina's 100 counties fund child and family services that are tied to the goal of increasing children's preparedness for school.

Smart Start works like a block grant. The state distributes funds to the North Carolina Partnership for Children (NCPC), a nonprofit organization created by the General Assembly to provide technical assistance and oversight for Smart Start statewide. NCPC then distributes funds to local non-profits called county partnerships. The legislation mandates a large portion of the local partnership's board membership, including the local school superintendent. Each local partnership develops a comprehensive

plan focusing on three core services: child care (quality, affordability, and availability), health, and family support. Targeting the community's greatest needs, existing programs may be expanded or new programs developed. Each service must connect to measurable outcomes.

Almost all counties applied for Smart Start funding in 1993, with 12 partnerships competitively selected. Twelve new partnerships were included each year until 1996, when all remaining counties began receiving service dollars. State allocations for Smart Start have increased from \$20 million in 1993-94 to \$250 million in 2000-2001. Full funding was originally estimated at \$300 million. State statute requires a 10 percent funding match from the private sector, and the initiative has garnered more than \$50 million in private funds and contributions since it began.

EVALUATION OF SMART START

At the beginning of Smart Start in 1993, a team of University of North Carolina researchers and evaluators from the

THEORIES OF CHANGE UNDERLYING SMART START

SMART START

Services for families and young children

Quality child
care efforts

Family
programs

Health
programs

Support of the early childhood system

Support for
planning and
collaboration

SHORT-TERM CHANGE

Better child care

Better-functioning
families

More children taking
advantage of a
greater number of
health services

More and different
people involved in
decision-making

LONG-TERM CHANGE

More "ready"
children at age 5

More "ready"
children at age 5

Children more
healthy at school
entry

Coordinated service
systems that
strengthen families
and children

ready, set, ...

Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center, the schools of education and social work, and the Maternal and Child Health Department was contracted to conduct a "statewide evaluation" of the program. Funding for the evaluation has been allocated year to year. Decisions about which areas to study have been made annually by the evaluation funders (the state Department of Health and Human Services), the NCPC director, and the evaluation team.

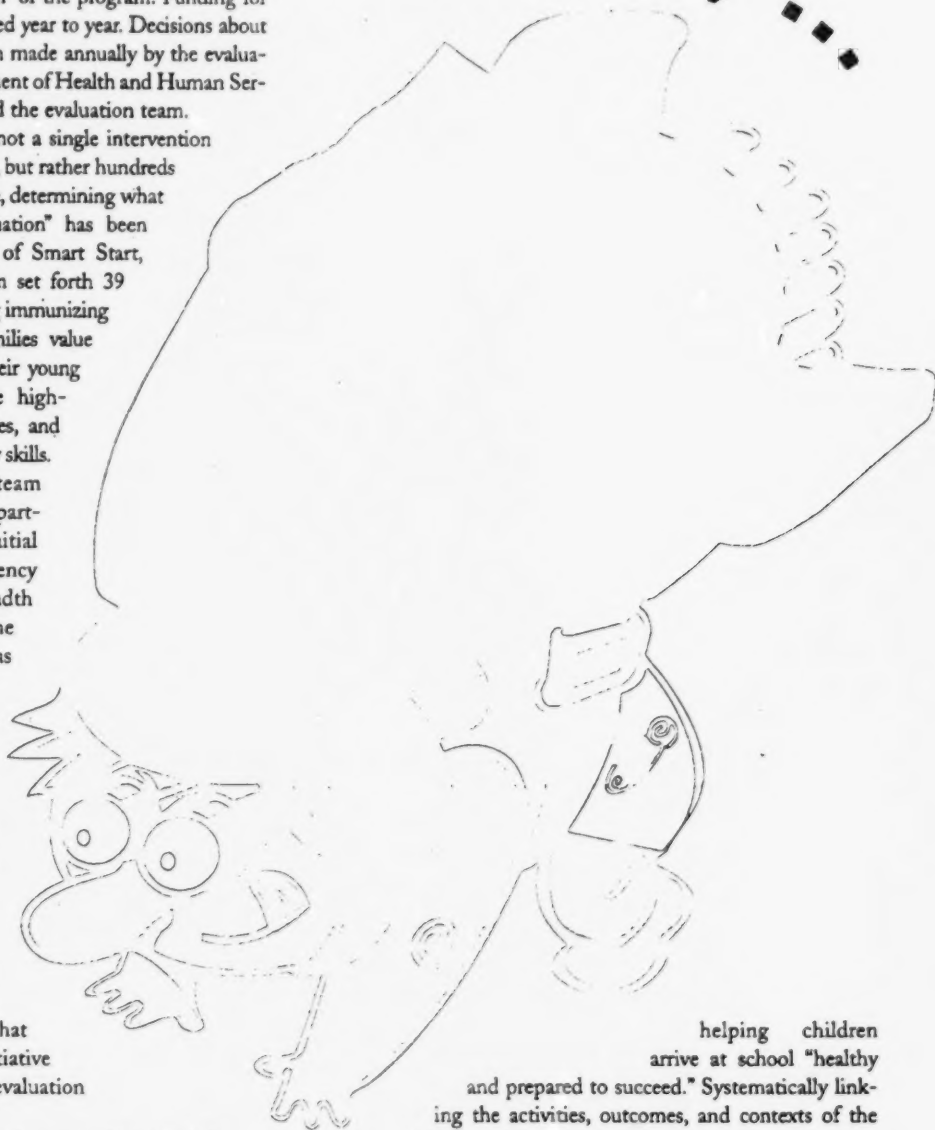
Given that Smart Start is not a single intervention nor even a dozen interventions, but rather hundreds of interventions across the state, determining what constitutes a "statewide evaluation" has been challenging. In the first year of Smart Start, NCPC and the administration set forth 39 goals for the initiative, including immunizing children on time, helping families value learning for themselves and their young children, providing affordable high-quality child care to all families, and increasing children's school entry skills.

As the evaluation team observed the first 12 county partnerships working on their initial plans and met with state agency leaders to determine the breadth and depth of the evaluation, the scope of possible studies was immense. Which of the many possible studies were most important? Where should we begin? A specific theory of change model had not been spelled out for Smart Start, although many theories of change were implicit in the activities being funded. To better guide our evaluation work, we depicted and simplified the theory of change that seemed to be guiding the initiative and have used it to guide our evaluation (see table opposite).

Theory of change. The first 12 partnerships funded 244 individual programs/activities in the first year, ranging from 10 to 54 activities within a single county. The evaluation team reviewed all of the activities and grouped them into one of four categories—activities that delivered services related to (1) quality child care improvement, (2) family functioning, (3) children's health care, or (4) increased/improved interagency collaboration. Most of these activities had implicit, if not explicit, short-term goals related to the long-term goal of

helping children arrive at school "healthy and prepared to succeed." Systematically linking the activities, outcomes, and contexts of the initiative sharpened the planning and implementation of the evaluation.³

Tying our work to the systems change model has kept our efforts focused substantially on child care quality and children's health, language, and social outcomes. Corollary studies have focused on families and on the entire collaboration process. We have used rigorous research methods and have conducted both qualitative and quantitative studies. Examples of studies in child care quality, children's school entry



skills, and health, family involvement, and local agency collaboration are presented below (a complete list is on our website at www.fpg.unc.edu/~smartstart).

Child Care Quality

Research shows that high-quality child care environments are positively related to children's later language, math, and behavior skills.⁴ Based on these findings, Smart Start partnerships direct about 30 to 40 percent of funds toward quality improvement of child care centers and family child care homes. Grants are provided to programs for specific quality enhancement activities. Higher rates of child care subsidy are given to centers that reach specific quality milestones. Technical assistance through training and mentoring helps child care providers deliver better care and education.

The evaluation has shown that each year the numbers of centers, teachers, and family child care providers who participate in these activities has increased. In FY 1999-2000, more than 50,000 families received a Smart Start child care subsidy to help with their child care expenses, 7,800 new child care spaces were created with Smart Start funding, and more than 130,000 children attended centers that participated in quality improvement activities. To put these numbers in perspective, about 600,000 children under age six live in North Carolina and approximately 185,000 are enrolled in licensed child care programs.

In addition to showing increased availability, on-site observations of over 180 randomly selected child care centers using a standardized measure of the quality of child care for preschoolers showed that child care quality increased significantly from 1994 to 1996.⁵ In addition, the quality of child care was significantly related to the number of local quality improvement activities in which the child care centers participated and, within a partnership, to the amount of money that was targeted to quality improvements.⁶ In a third round of child care observations in 1999, we again showed that quality was improving.⁴ And although we do not yet

CHALLENGES IN EVALUATING SMART START

Although Smart Start and other new, comprehensive community-based initiatives may be very appropriate for solving complex community problems, they are challenging to evaluate. Connell, Kubisch, Schorr, and Weiss discussed six specific difficulties, and we faced them all.⁷ First, Smart Start is a *horizontally complex* initiative, affecting multiple community systems, such as child care, schools, and health agencies. Second, it is also *vertically complex*, targeting change at multiple levels of the community, including service systems, families, and individuals. Third, Smart Start attempts to *affect a broad range of outcomes*, including outcomes that are difficult to define and measure, such as collaboration among service agencies.

We have addressed horizontal and vertical complexity by designing and conducting evaluations of different components of Smart Start and then tying the studies together for the policymakers via the systems change model. Focusing on one component at a time has also reduced the problems associated with a range of goals.

Contextual issues must always be considered, though, because individual local programs and interventions are not taking place in isolation and are affected by economic and political factors not controlled by the initiative leaders. This fourth evaluation challenge can sometimes be addressed by using county demographic variables such as average household income or education as predictors in statistical models. However, we have no proxy variables for a number of other contextual factors that may be at work. For example, the political leadership in the state House of Representatives changed hands the year after Smart Start began; Hurricane Fran devastated several eastern counties in 1996; and the number of Hispanic families in the state has tripled in the 1990s. How does one take these factors into account in a systemwide evaluation?

Evaluators are also challenged by *flexible and evolving interventions*, developed by community members and possibly redefined at each funding cycle. The way in which Smart Start partnership boards spend their funds and the amount designated for specific types of services varies widely across partnerships and, within a partnership, across years. We have tried to take this into account by using a proportion of funds appropriated for specific services as an indicator of a county's commitment to that service. In the child care quality study, the funding proportion was indeed a predictor. However, the amount of funding is only a proxy for the actual intensity and quality of services provided. Understanding the initiative's effects can be enhanced with documentation of service quality and quantity.

The sixth evaluation challenge has been the *absence of a comparison community or control group*. Traditional random assignment designs have been impossible because communities were not randomly assigned to receive or not receive Smart Start and because their initiatives are often aimed at all individuals in a community. Even if random assignment of individuals within a community were possible, it would be difficult in many cases to determine who is and who is not participating in the "intervention" because Smart Start efforts have been well integrated into the existing service system. Although we can match counties on certain demographic characteristics, we cannot match on intangibles such as the presence or absence of a dynamic executive director and activist board members. The evaluation tends generally to look within counties for unserved or underserved children, families, or child care centers and then make up a comparison group. Such a comparison group does not have the elegance or methodological acceptance of a randomized study, but when the comparability of the two groups can be documented, the results of studies with this approach are accepted. Pre-post comparison studies are another way to address this evaluation challenge.

On-site observations...using a standardized measure...showed that child care quality increased significantly from 1994 to 1996.

have change-over-time data for family child care homes, we have documented a positive association between family child care quality and participation in Smart Start quality initiatives, although the overall quality of family child care in the state is low.⁹

Children's School Success

A major long-term goal of Smart Start is that children arrive at school healthy and ready to succeed. The child care, family support, and health efforts funded by Smart Start should all contribute positively to children's developmental status when they enter kindergarten. For example, in FY 1999-2000, over 90,000 children received health or developmental screenings that were funded by Smart Start. The evaluation team has documented kindergartners' entry status via kindergarten teacher ratings of large numbers of children (both teachers and children selected randomly and representatively from state records) in 1995, 1997, and 1999. We have seen no change in children's mean ratings or in the percentages of children deemed "ready to succeed in school" (between 81 and 82 percent each year).¹⁰ This sampling strategy, however, did not allow us to know whether a child or family participated in any local Smart Start programs.

When we followed into kindergarten 214 preschoolers who had attended child care centers that had participated in extensive Smart Start quality improvement activities, and compared them to 294 classmates who had attended non-Smart Start child care, we were able to show significant differences between the two groups.¹¹ Smart Start children entered school with significantly higher vocabulary scores and more positive teacher ratings of their skills. They were also significantly less likely to have behavior problems. These differences were seen even after controlling for poverty, which was a very strong predictor of children's kindergarten entry skills. Comparing the same groups of children, those who attended Smart Start centers were significantly more likely to have a regular source of health care than children who had not (90 percent versus 82 percent).¹²

Families

An important goal of Smart Start is to help families effectively fulfill their roles as primary providers, nurturers, and teachers of their children. Smart Start programs provide families with information, education, and support to help their child be prepared for success in school. Smart Start funds family resource centers, training in parenting skills, parent educa-

tion opportunities, and family literacy and home visiting programs. In FY 1999-2000, over 66,000 families received parent education and support from a Smart Start program, and 22,000 families received information, education, or support specifically from a Smart Start family resource center.

Because of the wide variety of family programs that are part of Smart Start, the evaluation has described the characteristics of the range of families involved in Smart Start rather than study specific programs.¹³ Through interviews with 356 families chosen randomly from the rolls of Smart Start-funded programs of all types, we learned that most Smart Start families are working and that a wide range of families, from low- to upper-income, were involved. Mothers who worked tended to work full-time, averaging 36 hours per week. Families engaged in educationally important activities with their children. We included questions from a national survey to show that Smart Start families read, played number games, told stories, and sang songs together as often, if not more often, than the national sample of parents of preschoolers.¹⁴ Although the majority of families were involved in at least one community group, 25 percent of families were not, and 25 percent also reported needing parenting education programs. Low-income families were more than twice as likely as middle-income families to report one or more barriers to obtaining needed services. The results of this study highlighted the fact that Smart Start is for all families, not just families in poverty, and that families highly desired and appreciated the kinds of services Smart Start was providing.

Collaboration

Smart Start is more than the sum of its parts. The evaluation team has conducted several studies of collaboration and community involvement using interviews and focus groups with partnerships and community members. The first qualitative studies were extensive observations of the planning process within local partnerships and interviews with key participants. The reports of these efforts not only described the collaboration and start-up process, but resulted in changes in the planning process requirements and in the provision of early childhood technical assistance and leadership training to the partnerships.¹⁵

In more recent studies, participants have reported that the Smart Start planning process has improved local inter-agency collaboration among organizations that serve young children and their families. Many participants think that collaboration is one of the most striking successes of Smart Start.¹⁶ Main-

Another lesson from Smart Start is that changes of the type expected in this initiative cannot and will not happen quickly.

taining parent and business involvement in local partnership boards is a challenge shouldered mainly by the executive directors of partnerships, but is perceived as essential for the partnership's success.¹⁷

The value of these qualitative studies is sometimes hard to assess, as it often seems that legislators focus more on hard data such as "service counts" and outcomes. However, the qualitative studies have provided rich descriptions of how the partnership process is working, which is, after all, the heart of the "intervention" known as Smart Start. These studies have gleaned lessons useful not only to North Carolina, but also to other states with similarly broad initiatives.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS OF THE SMART START FINDINGS

The evidence generated by the Smart Start evaluation has shown that a comprehensive community initiative can increase collaboration, serve more children, improve child care quality, and result in increased school entry skills. These changes have been achieved in large part because significant amounts of attention and money have been focused on these concerns. Visionary leadership from the governor and a number of other state leaders provided the impetus for Smart Start. Considerable funding has been allocated by the General Assembly. Solving major problems is accomplished with major efforts, not fiddling around the edges.

Another lesson learned from Smart Start is that changes of the type expected in this initiative cannot and will not happen quickly. In the first two years of Smart Start, the successes shown by the evaluation were at the service delivery level—increasing numbers of children and families were receiving a variety of services that one hoped were beneficial. It was only in the third year of the initiative that we could present data showing that quality indeed was improving, and it was in the fifth year that we documented a relationship between Smart Start participation and children's skills. Comprehensive initiatives need to be evaluated over a period of time long enough to show change.

Comprehensive initiatives also require comprehensive evaluations. No single study will ever prove the worth of such an initiative. Multiple studies can be combined, especially when they make theoretical sense, to show where and how components of the effort may be having their effect. Both quantitative and qualitative studies provide useful information.

As increased accountability (i.e., end-of-year testing) is required of public schools, legislators tend to think that the

effects of Smart Start can be similarly measured. Explaining that young children cannot be assessed in the same manner (not, we believe, that third graders should be either), Smart Start leaders emphasize that the initiative is intended to have broad effects and that children should be assessed holistically. Yet the enabling legislation directly mentions "ready to succeed in school," so the demands for readiness outcomes remain high.

Smart Start was initiated by a powerful state leader and has had the commitment of many legislators over the past eight years. What happens to such initiatives in changing political and economic climates? North Carolina has a new governor who, while committed to quality education and care for young children, is also interested in expanding prekindergarten. A recent court ruling could have implications for Smart Start as well.

A lawsuit by school systems in poor counties seeking more equitable school funding began seven years ago. The last of three rulings in this case was delivered in March 2001. Superior Court Judge Howard Manning emphasized the state's educational obligation to at-risk children of all ages. He focused especially on four-year-olds, ruling that North Carolina has a constitutional obligation to provide pre-kindergarten education for at-risk four-year-olds to ensure "their constitutional right to receive the equal opportunity to a sound, basic education." The judge did not require the state to allocate new funds for at-risk children, but implied that "frills" could be eliminated in order to fund such programs.

The state is appealing this ruling, so any action is likely to be delayed for at least a year, but in a year in which the state is facing an \$800 million deficit, the ruling has inevitably begun to pit worthwhile early childhood programs against each other. Legislators who have never favored Smart Start are inclined to either redirect the Smart Start funds or to require Smart Start to become the funding source for public prekindergarten. The NCPC counters that it does indeed already fund public prekindergarten, with almost \$8 million of Smart Start funds in the current year being spent in a number of counties that fund local preschool programs in schools, community centers, and Head Start. NCPC is very willing to be a partner in an expansion of public prekindergarten but does not believe that scaling back the many Smart Start efforts for children under age four and their families would be a wise move. The options will continue to be discussed in the halls of the General Assembly until a final budget for the next biennium is approved.

What data does the Smart Start evaluation team contribute to this debate? We have provided evidence that child care quality has significant effects on children's learning and social skills and that Smart Start is improving quality in North Carolina.¹⁸ Quality improvements affect large numbers of children—all those who attend centers that are involved. On the other hand, previous research (some of it by Smart Start evaluators) shows that more intensive center-based educational interventions can have significant effects on high-risk children's development.¹⁹ These programs usually focus more intense educational resources on small numbers of children. Both broad quality improvement and focused interventions are effective. Which is more valuable? A cost-benefit study is needed.

In summary, the Smart Start evaluation team has provided evidence that many of the initiative's goals are being achieved—child care is improving, more families who need child care are receiving it, families are engaged in their children's lives, children in Smart Start involved centers are more ready to succeed at school entry and more likely to have a regular health care provider, and collaboration among agencies and community members is improving. The evidence supports the view that Smart Start is an innovative and effective model for other states and communities to follow as they embark on broad new initiatives for children and families. Local control, community planning/collaboration, and a comprehensive approach to reach all children have been the keys to success.

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improving family reading

Family Literacy



Today more than ever there is a need for services that provide parents with a way to increase their own literacy skills, as well as improve their parenting skills and the lifelong learning skills of their children. Parents are a child's first teacher. Many parents, especially those who have not had successful educational experiences themselves, don't know the importance of early developmental stages or how to support positive growth during these phases.

Children reflect their experiences and exposure. They pattern their actions and value systems around what they see exemplified by those around them. Having parents who are nurturing and have a good understanding of how to foster literacy development is essential to the academic and reading success of children entering schools today. Once children begin school, it is often even more important for their parents to support learning and literacy in meaningful ways and provide an environment that fosters a love for learning. Family literacy addresses these concerns and more. Ensuring that parents have an active role in learning is essential to the success of

is working to develop a model for comprehensive family literacy services in elementary schools. Through the development of this model, NCFL has identified ways that school districts can ensure the success of students and families. Schools, teachers, and parents are consistently reporting positive impacts on students and the community at large through implementation of such comprehensive family literacy services.

FAMILY LITERACY IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

Traditionally, family literacy has been associated with early childhood programs. In 1998, however, the National Center for Family Literacy, in partnership with Toyota Motor Corporation, began model development of a family literacy program in the elementary school setting. Building on key successes of the preschool model, the Families in Schools model is currently being implemented in 45 elementary schools in 15 school districts across the country. All of these pilot programs are operating in Title I schools where a majority of students receive free or reduced-price lunches.*

pathway to success

by Shani Yero

children, schools, and families. Family literacy leads to that pathway to success. Over the past 30 years, a wealth of research has indicated that when parents are involved in their children's education, achievement increases. Studies find that a child's academic success is related to the educational level of the parents, specifically the mother.¹ School administrators cite parents' lack of basic skills as a barrier to supporting their children's learning.² Teachers admit that if parents don't assume responsibility for various aspects of their children's schooling, additional efforts to improve children's education are destined to fail.

Children from low-income and minority families have the most to gain when schools involve parents.³ Additionally, there is substantial evidence that positive effects on children and their parents are best achieved by services aimed directly at parents.⁴ Family literacy targets children most at risk of academic failure and works to build strong connections between parents and schools to create a community committed to lifelong learning.

This article describes the Families in Schools program, an initiative through the National Center for Family Literacy (NCFL) that

The Families in School model targets parents and children with the greatest need. It draws structure from the federal definition of family literacy, which states that services should be "of sufficient intensity ... and duration to make sustainable changes in a family and that integrate the following activities: 1) interactive literacy activities between parents and their children; 2) training for parents regarding how to be the primary teacher for their children and full partners in the education of their children; 3) parent literacy training that leads to economic self-sufficiency; and 4) an age-appropriate education to prepare children for success in school and life experiences."

This definition corresponds directly to the four components implemented in the Families in Schools model. These central features include:

1. **Parent and Child Together (PACT) Time.** This unique aspect of family literacy provides a framework for true parent involvement in learning. Parents, who are acclimated to the school culture and prepared to enter their children's classrooms through adult education classes, participate in their children's learning process and observe their children's learning behavior in the classroom. Parents also have the opportunity to see firsthand how their child interacts with other classmates and with the teacher. Classroom teachers work with parents to assist them in helping their children meet state standards, modeling instructional strategies that are scientifically based on reading research and sound educational practices that carry over to the home.

*Implementation sites include Aurora, Colorado; Charleston, West Virginia; Evansville, Indiana; Fremont, California; Ft. Lauderdale, Florida; Houston, Texas; Los Angeles, California; Louisville, Kentucky; Nashville, Tennessee; New Orleans, Louisiana; Richmond, Virginia; Rochester, New York; Seattle, Washington; St. Louis, Missouri; and Tucson, Arizona.

Additionally, parents apply the academic skills gained in adult education sessions and identify future personal goals as they participate in classroom activities with their child.

2. **Parent Time.** This regularly scheduled component offers parents time to discuss areas of interest they themselves identify, which may include developmental and grade-level expectations for their children, discipline or behavior issues, or questions regarding curriculum or instruction arising from PACT Time participation. Parent time also provides parents an opportunity to bond with one another and share information about common challenges that may revolve around their families, such as health issues, social services, or employment. While parents guide the topics for discussion, parent time in the elementary school setting can draw from the array of human resources located within the school and the community, such as principals, teachers, and counselors.
3. **Adult Education.** Many parents of at-risk students have academic needs and goals themselves, which may range from GED instruction, ESL classes, computer literacy, and vocational skills to enhancing their literacy or basic academic skills. Adult education can help parents not only start on the path to economic self-sufficiency, but also become stronger supporters of their children's education. If lack of education is a barrier to meaningful parent involvement, adult education in elementary school family literacy programs helps to eliminate that obstacle.
4. **Children's Education.** Improving achievement levels of elementary school children is the primary goal of the Families in Schools model. The use of effective, evidence-based reading instruction methods in classrooms is strongly encouraged in family literacy programs. Assisting teachers to share these practices with parents so that they can support their children's academic experience is the backbone of the family literacy approach.

Many schools may provide some or all of these elements to parents through various programs. Crucial to the success of family literacy in the elementary school, however, is that these four components are carefully integrated and connected. What occurs in the children's education component impacts the adult education classroom. And what happens in adult education classes has a profound effect on what transpires as parents work with their children during PACT Time. Parent time discussions reflect topics of relevance to the participating families and is one reason why adults stay enrolled in family literacy programs—their individual needs are being met. Not only are they engaged in activities that will lead to personal gain, but that will also help them to improve the lives of family members for generations.

ADDITIONAL BENEFITS OF FAMILY LITERACY

Children and their parents aren't the only ones who benefit from efforts like Families in Schools. Family literacy programs can have a much broader positive impact on, for example, teachers, schools, and communities.

Teachers—When children know that their parents and teachers are working together on the same team in support of their education, attendance, positive behavior and homework completion rates improve. These improvements increase teacher morale and

ultimately the whole community views schools more positively. Hesitant parents become enthusiastic advocates as they learn more about school protocol and are welcomed into the school culture.⁵

Schools—School improvement plans begin to embrace parental involvement in ways that reach far beyond counting attendance at open houses and parent-teacher conferences. Action steps can include family literacy services that target children and parents with the greatest need to ensure that parents can support classroom instruction in meaningful ways. Action steps can also address how to equip parents with the skills and resources they need to become full partners in their children's education.

Communities—As schools serve the needs of families and adults, communities benefit by gaining a stronger job pool, which can ultimately lead to a stronger local economy. The community, in turn, may be able to better support the school. Students receive higher grades and test scores and fewer placements in special education. Parents, who now see themselves as an integral part of the school environment, develop more confidence in the school, in their ability to help their children learn, and in their own parenting skills.⁶

WHAT IT TAKES: AN EQUATION FOR SUCCESS

Policymakers and practitioners alike have recognized that parents must be included in the equation for educational success. But the equation is dependant on teachers making a "parent-digm" shift to view parents as adult learners and partners in every child's education. This equation also requires that communities work collaboratively with schools to provide the resources necessary to create learning communities that hinge on lifelong learning for adults as well as children.

Vision and Direction

To ensure that this equation equals success, several things must happen. States and districts must take the lead and set policies that demonstrate both to parents and educators that family literacy is a priority. Because individual schools set their agenda according to the direction of the central office, district administrators must set clear and definite goals and provide staff training so that family-friendly schools are created where teachers reach out to "hard-to-reach" parents and "hard-to-teach" students.⁷ Training for teachers and school staff should include the development of concrete skills that lead to suspending personal judgments in order to bring about effective communication and teamwork with parents. Training should also include helping teachers value parents' knowledge of their own children's strengths and weaknesses. Understanding how parents, no matter what their academic level, can team with teachers to ensure student success can be an enormous benefit to teachers as they learn about students and design instruction that meets their needs.

Guidance and Support

Support and assistance in implementing comprehensive family literacy programs must originate with school board policy and the central office. Schools need adequate time and ongoing technical assistance to build capacity in order to institutionalize family literacy services. Perhaps most importantly, they need guidance from the district office in collaborating internally as well as externally with funding sources to provide family literacy necessities such as space,

materials, and high-quality adult education services. Comprehensive family literacy services can also be used to meet the intent and purposes of many federal programs such as Title I, Even Start, Head Start, REA (Reading Excellence Act), 21st Century Learning Centers, and Title VII (Bilingual Education). These services can ensure that federal programs make systemic changes in the lives of children, families, and future generations to come. Carefully implemented family literacy services can help educators and parents move beyond "finger pointing" to begin to develop comprehensive and continuous plans for connecting home, school, and communities.¹

District and School Policies

Local school boards should make efforts to include positive assumptions about parent involvement into district and campus goals, such as:

- Parents can and will help their children learn.
- Schools will provide a welcoming and inviting environment for parent and community involvement.
- Teachers can and will help parents support their child's learning through family literacy services by employing two-way communication and mutual respect.
- Schools can and will link federal, state, and local funds and initiatives to provide seamless support systems for families.

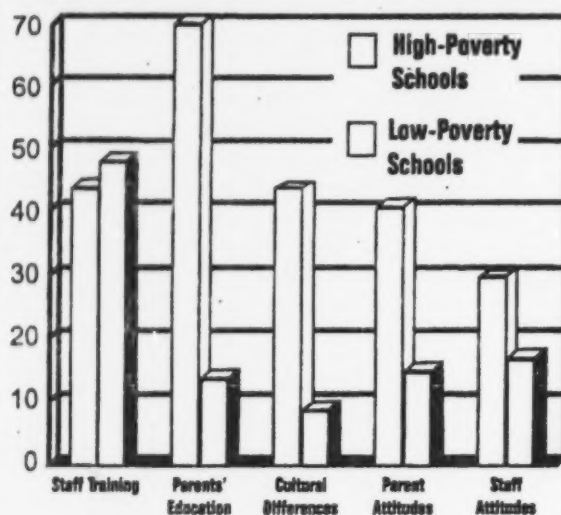
CONCLUSION: EXAMPLES OF SUCCESS

According to James P. Comer, professor of child psychiatry at the Yale Child Study Center, "Parents and teachers are child developers. When the work of parents in schools is designed to enable them to help the school staff support the development of their children, they will get involved." Further, parents who are engaged in activities that also support their own growth and development will stay involved.²

Family literacy services in elementary schools, when implemented with sufficient intensity and duration, present opportunities for change that are not superficial but systemic in nature. The following stories of individuals involved in Families in Schools initiatives around the country demonstrate the impact successful programs can have on parents and students.

- Sheila, an adult family literacy student in Nashville who completed her GED through the family literacy program, is now employed. Her son's teachers report positive changes in his behavior in the classroom. Because of her success in the family literacy program, she has encouraged her teenage daughter, a new mother herself, to enroll.
- Inez, an adult student in New Orleans who received her GED with the help of the Families in Schools program, is now pursuing a degree at Xavier College, where she is doing well. Her son now sees her as a positive role model, and her family has hope for a better economic future.
- Ernesto Badillo, a fifth-grade elementary teacher in Tucson, speaks to systemic change when he reports, "It's significant that students who were involved in PACT Time by far showed more growth than any other child in my classroom. They jumped two or three grade levels in reading."
- And Amalia, a second-grade student in Tucson, embodies systemic change when she proudly says, "I feel that my mom really does care about my work. She's really interested in the stuff I do. I'm getting better grades because my mom helps me, the

BARRIERS TO PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT AS IDENTIFIED BY TITLE I PRINCIPALS



Adapted from Title I Monitor, Special Report on Parental Involvement, January 2000.

teacher helps her, and she helps me, so I'm learning more and more day by day."

As schools start on the path through the 21st century, they must find new ways to meaningfully involve parents in the learning process. Family literacy provides a framework for that involvement that will not only impact today's students but the generations of students to come. In order for schools to truly "leave no child behind," parents must be brought along as well. Educators must walk hand-in-hand with parents, who are the most constant and influential forces in the lives of their children. We must all walk together along the pathway to success.

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Washington Notebook

by David Griffith

Testing, testing, testing." These days it's not just a microphone check, but the only issue that gets talked about in President Bush's comprehensive education reform plan. Such attention is not surprising. Testing is easily understood by parents (students putting No. 2 pencil to bubble-sheeted paper), conveys larger, popular ideals like high standards and "no social promotion" in the press, and gives politicians the appearance of tough action in the absence of accompanying reforms or additional resources.

What is surprising is that such an extensive testing mandate on states would so smashingly succeed just three years removed from the demise of Clinton's comparably smaller and less intrusive voluntary national tests. That Bush could successfully assert such federal control over such a basic state education responsibility as assessments reaffirms the wisdom behind the old adage that only Nixon could go to China.

To his credit, the President has been consistent on testing for years. But it has been interesting to watch legislators recently converted to the federal testing cause rationalize their past opposition to *voluntary* national tests and newfound support for *mandated* state tests. In Washington, this is seen as a major policy distinction. Locally, it's all just known as testing.

Regardless of one's position on the federal versus the state role in testing, it has become a moot point, not only because requiring states to annually test students in grades three through eight in reading and math is a done deal, but because it completely overlooks the more fundamental issue of what the federal government will do with the state test scores it will soon require. To paraphrase a famous campaign slogan, "It's the accountability, stupid!"

What is being proposed is nothing short of a national accountability system, an unprecedented attempt by the federal government to link student performance to federal funds. It will have a direct and dramatic impact on every state's accountability plan—and in standards-based reform, accountability is the key to the states' education kingdoms.

For the first time, the federal government is not focusing exclusively on the performance of Title I students, but all students. The President's *No Child Left Behind* legislation, quite literally, means *every* public school student in the country.

States will be held accountable, with financial rewards or sanctions (primarily sanctions), for how well all of their students and subgroups of students perform on state tests. States will rank schools and districts based on those same state test scores.

The premise is based on "AYP" (Adequate Yearly Progress), which is the annual rate of improvement states, dis-

tricts, and schools will have to meet so that 100 percent of students and subgroups of students are proficient in all state standards at the end of ten years. Annual testing has been called the heart of the education reform package, but there is no doubt that AYP is the teeth of the plan. A state's failure to make AYP in consecutive years will result in a loss of between 30 and 75 percent of state administrative funds. Schools and districts face corrective action, including reconstitutions and takeovers, for a similar inability to make AYP. In short, the plan will dictate how districts hold schools accountable, how states hold districts accountable, and how the feds hold states accountable.

Designing a national accountability system is infinitely trickier than simply requiring states to administer self-selected assessments. Indeed, initial efforts by the White House and Congress to reconcile the competing interests of rigor and national uniformity, on the one hand, with flexibility to account for each state's unique circumstances, on the other, have proven daunting.

Using the proposed criteria and state assessment data from the past decade, Congress discovered that more than 90 percent of Title I schools would immediately be labeled as low performing. The bad news was not just confined to schools and districts. States with excellent reputations such as Connecticut and North Carolina were also identified as failing based on the proposed formula and past performance. In fact, every state failed AYP. Predictably, governors were apoplectic. Their reaction, albeit at a rarified level, was the same as that of suburban parents who support high standards and accountability—until it affects them. Could a state boycott of federal testing and accountability requirements (and federal money) be just beyond the horizon?

The White House and Congressional leaders will try to fix the AYP formula so that it is workable, is acceptable to the states, doesn't manufacture an education crisis nor discredit the good work being done in the states, incorporates most if not all of the President's education priorities, and maintains high standards.

How this tall order will be accomplished and, more importantly, how this massive federal accountability system will be integrated with each state's own accountability system is difficult to predict. But there is no doubt that the level of federal involvement in the states' education business is about to grow exponentially and could leave many state policymakers wishing that Congress had not tried to do them any favors and just gone ahead with a national test after all.

David Griffith is NASBE's director of governmental affairs.

State Innovations

Ohio's Indicators of Success Early Childhood Assessment Program

by David Kysilko

It is widely reported—and most policymakers and parents agree—that high-quality preschool programs can make a real difference in the lives of young children, both socially and academically. Yet as states have continued to develop and refine their standards and as legislatures have pumped more funding into early childhood education, the need for systematically checking the progress of young children has grown. This is true in terms of diagnosing problems individuals have in learning, ensuring that they are on track regarding the state's standards, and ensuring that the programs themselves are improving or maintaining their quality. But as several articles in this issue of the *Standard* have pointed out, doing such assessments on a systemwide basis with a high degree of validity and reliability—while ensuring that individual children are helped and not harmed by the process—is extraordinarily difficult.

Ohio is one of the few states that has entered this arena on a large scale. In part, this is because the state has a long commitment to early childhood education: it is now serving over 80 percent of children who qualify for services, backed by over \$100 million in state monies. But this level of funding has begged the question of accountability and prompted the search for data that demonstrates the impact of Head Start on children—data that, for the most part, has not existed, particularly at the state level. Addressing these concerns, in 1997, the state legislature required the department of education to develop an assessment system for measuring outcomes for all children—including those with disabilities—attending state-funded Head Start and public preschool programs.

This propelled the department into a lengthy development process that included involving key stakeholder groups (legislators, advocates, program staff, parents, and department staff) as well as technical experts in determining—and getting consensus on—the specific child outcomes that would be tracked across programs. Once this was accomplished (with some difficulty), the department then had to select a common assessment instrument that could measure for these outcomes, be used by all programs, and meet a number of other specific criteria. These criteria (among others) required that the assessment:

- collect data by observing children in a natural setting;
- be useful to teachers for planning instruction;
- be able to identify children who may require special interventions;
- track child progress toward fourth grade curricula outcomes;
- provide information for program accountability;
- be used with children from birth to age eight at all ability levels;
- categorize observations in content areas and developmental domains; and
- provide data on individual children that could be aggregated at the classroom, program, and state levels.

The instrument that most closely fit these criteria and was chosen by the department is the Measurement and Planning System (MAPS) section of the Galileo software application, developed by Assessment Technology, Inc. While no instrument can perfectly fit the needs of any given program, one advantage of Galileo was that it was flexible enough so that its scales could be modified to fit with the state's academic standards. In using Galileo, teachers collect observational data in the classroom in the areas of language and literacy, math, social development, self-help skills, and science and enter them into computer files. These are collected in the first part of the year to document children's skills on entry, and again at year's end. In the meantime, teachers continually add new data and—because the system is ongoing—they are able to access the information at any time to get a current picture of how their students are doing.

Implementation Issues

With the progress of roughly 25,000 young children now being tracked, Ohio education officials are encouraged with the current implementation of the Indicators of Success program. Officials note that there is still much work to be done, however. Training is very time consuming, with about 16 hours of instruction needed to help teachers and administrators understand the assessment, utilize the software, and analyze the data. In part this is helping teachers regularly think about where their students currently are in their academic and social development—and how to move them forward. Another issue is simply the time it takes to use the assessment: approximately two hours per week for observing, one-and-a-half hours for inputting data, and a half-hour for analyzing the information. In addition, officials want to ensure that the assessment process remains a tool for teachers to use in guiding instruction, rather than being a goal in itself. Concerned about the accountability aspects, some teachers have resorted to drill and kill strategies to improve results, while others have become slaves to observation and documentation—spending too much time walking around with clipboards making checkmarks rather than teaching. To address these issues, the department created a user's manual that provides many examples of how to use observations within the assessment scale in developmentally appropriate ways.

Finally, officials emphasize that the design of the system is far from complete—intentionally so. In fact, they point out, “we do not intend to reach a point of completion. If we are using data to guide our improvement, we will always be setting higher, more meaningful goals.”

For more information on Ohio's Indicators of Success program, contact Dawn Denno at 513-874-1771.

David Kysilko is editor of the State Education Standard.

by Kevin McDowell

Judicial Review

A Methodology to the Madness: The Struggle between Education and Development in Early Childhood Special Education

As courts have noted, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is long on definition but short on guidelines. Definitions are either too nebulous for practical application or associated with various state standards that have to be established to implement the law, leading to inconsistent court decisions that are frequently "decided on an ad-hoc basis." One of the more nebulous concepts is "free appropriate public education" (FAPE), which is so ambiguous that its statutory and regulatory definitions prevent "effective application by the courts" of the term, often resulting in courts being "required to analyze and comprehend voluminous expert testimony and documentation concerning specialized teaching goals, methods, and standards of education."¹

The seminal case on defining what constitutes FAPE was *Board of Education of the Hendrick Hudson Central School District v. Rowley*. In its ruling, the Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals determined that "Rowley and its progeny leave no doubt that parents, no matter how well motivated, do not have the right under [IDEA] to compel a school district to provide a specific program or employ a specific methodology in providing for the education of their handicapped child." The U.S. Supreme Court entered the fray when it decided *Rowley*, creating a two-part test for determining when a child with a disability has received a FAPE:

1. Has the public agency complied with the procedures established by IDEA?
2. Is the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) developed through IDEA's procedures reasonably calculated to enable the child to receive educational benefits?

This is often referred to as the "minimal standard of appropriateness" in that an educational program will be considered adequate so long as the program is reasonably calculated to confer some educational benefit, though no actual benefit must necessarily be realized in the final analysis. Courts

have indicated that this is a somewhat low standard for school districts to meet but have expressed reluctance to find in favor of schools where the educational program would have conferred only *de minimis* or trivial academic advancement or otherwise failed to provide a "basic floor of opportunity." The *Rowley* court indicated that the "reasonably calculated" standard could be met where the IEP was designed "to enable the child to achieve passing marks and advance from grade to grade."

This standard becomes more troublesome for parents, school personnel, and adjudicators where "educational benefit" is not so easily quantified by standard grading practices and advancement from grade to grade. The more non-traditional a student's needs, the more individualized the student's IEP will need to be. It follows by necessity that non-traditional learners will be more involved in disputes over "methodology," particularly where parents and schools disagree regarding a student's primary needs. A flash point for such disputes occurs especially where a child with autism is beginning to transition from an early childhood program designed for infants and toddlers (up to two years old) to a more traditional school-based program for children who are three or more years of age.

FAPE versus Developmental Appropriateness

IDEA creates two different programs with two different (but not necessarily differing) emphases. Part B of IDEA is concerned with typical educational functions beginning with preschool. The emphasis under Part B is to ensure that children with disabilities who are at least three years of age have available to them a FAPE that provides special education and related services to meet their unique needs and prepares them for roles within the social construct.

Under Part C of IDEA, however, the emphasis is not upon instruction but upon

"early intervention services" that are designed "to enhance the development of infants and toddlers with disabilities and to minimize their potential for developmental delay." Part C is more expansive in addressing family needs, while Part B is concerned with the child's educational entitlement. Part C addresses developmental needs through an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP), and although there is a requirement to provide such early intervention services "to the maximum extent appropriate ... in natural environments, including the home, and community settings in which children without disabilities participate," many services are provided in the home. Part B is implemented principally through an IEP. But Part B requires that a child with a disability receive a FAPE, and that this FAPE be provided in the "least restrictive environment" (LRE). LRE is not defined by IDEA, other than to require that public educational agencies ensure that "to the maximum extent appropriate" children with disabilities are educated with children who are not disabled, and that removal of a child with a disability from the typical educational environment occur "only when the nature or severity of the disability of a child is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily." In short, FAPE and LRE, when combined, militate against home-based programs and separation of students with disabilities from students without disabilities.

If the reader is somewhat confused at this point, then the reader can somewhat appreciate the misunderstandings that occur when a parent of a child with autism—who, by the very nature of this disability, has significant delays in communication, socialization, and academic achievement—fails to appreciate the nuances of the FAPE/LRE relationship versus addressing the developmental needs of the child. This has led to a virtual explo-

Judicial Review

sion of litigation across the country, often embroiling SEAs in what appear at first blush to be local disputes. Battle lines are drawn. Both sides are armed with experts in autism or specific methodologies, ready to disparage any program proposed by the other. Polarization has occurred, sometimes encouraged by the purveyors of specific methodologies.

But this need not occur. Recent litigation has indicated that a number of public school districts have amended their previous stances, which has been met by courts with no small degree of appreciation. Rather than dismiss outright a developmentally intense program the parents had been employing either through a Part C service agency or on their own, public schools have been more actively engaged in observing such home-based programs and employing some of the techniques as "related services" in the child's IEP.*

The Cases

Board of Education of Kanawha County v. Michael M. involved a child who was diagnosed with autism at the age of three. His parents established, at their own expense, a home-based program using the Lovaas methodology, employing discrete trial training (DTT). This is a labor-intensive approach that employs two private instructors trained in the method to work with the child. The family asked the school district to incorporate the home-based program into the child's IEP, which the school refused, offering instead its preschool program of approximately two-

and-a-half hours a day (a typical period for preschool programs). An Impartial Hearing Officer (IHO) found the school's program inadequate and the Lovaas program appropriate for this child's needs. As a consequence, the IHO ordered the school to incorporate the Lovaas program into the child's IEP. The school eventually offered twenty hours of DTT in a school setting, but the parents declined, believing this program inadequate. They withdrew the child from the school's preschool program and continued the home-based program.

When the child was due to enter kindergarten, the school failed to prepare an IEP in a timely manner, and when it did, the IEP did not include any Lovaas methodology. At the time, the child was receiving 30 to 38 hours a week of one-to-one DTT at home. The parents again withdrew the child from school. The following school year, the child began attending school on a continuous basis pursuant to an IEP that met IDEA procedural requirements. The home-based program, however, was not included in the school's IEP. The parents sought another hearing and were successful in obtaining reimbursement for their expenses in implementing the home-based program. The school sought judicial review.

The district court, in finding for the parents, acknowledged the *Rowley* standards for assessing FAPE, but also noted that "the phrase 'reasonably calculated to provide some educational benefit' is only slightly less nebulous than the statutory definition contained in the IDEA itself.... To determine whether an autistic child is receiving a free appropriate public education, the court must examine the IEP to determine whether it is reasonably calculated to provide benefit in academic areas and non-traditional areas critical to the child's education. Improvement in these areas is not as easily quantified through regular grading and advancement systems."

In this case, the parents did not allege the school failed the first part of the test (procedural inadequacies or technical violations). The sole issue was whether the

IEPs developed were reasonably calculated to enable the child to receive some educational benefit.

The court noted that whether or not an IEP meets the second part of the *Rowley* test depends upon the IEP "at the time of creation." "Courts should not judge an IEP in hindsight; instead, courts should look to the IEP's goals and methodology at the time of its creation and ask whether it was reasonably calculated to provide educational benefit. Ultimate success is not the touchstone of the inquiry; reasonable calculation is all that is required under the law." Thus, the initial burden of proof is on the school district to prove the IEP, at its creation, was reasonably calculated to provide some educational benefit to the child. To meet its burden of proof, a school district must address adequately the following three areas:

1. Has the school district met all the procedural requirements for developing an IEP for the child, including the necessary elements for the IEP itself?
2. Are the annual goals, benchmarks, and short-term objectives set forth in the IEP reasonable in that goals must be realistic and attainable yet more than trivial and *de minimus*? This area can be addressed through the use of expert testimony, supported by materials and experience, as to what are reasonable goals for a child of similar age and disability. State standards are important in this analysis, but where "objective state criteria" cannot be met, there must be specified individualized justification for why the child's disability prevents meeting such criteria.
3. Is the methodology employed by the school tailored to meet the annual goals, benchmarks, and short-term objectives set forth in the IEP? This can also be established through expert testimony regarding "the methodology ... generally accepted in the educational community for similarly situated children...."

The court opined that the school's IEPs may have met these three standards but the testimony demonstrated a "failure of

*Although there are a number of competing programs aimed at addressing developmental needs of children with autism (including "Applied Behavioral Analysis" [ABA] and "Lovaas"), many of them employ similar terms and techniques. A key component is the "discrete trial format" or "discrete trial training" (DTT), a series of distinct lessons with clear beginnings and endings that are repeated over and over again until the child demonstrates mastery. The training usually occurs in a one-to-one setting, with positive reinforcement used to encourage compliance with any task. It is not uncommon for Lovaas-type programs to require 35 to 40 hours of "therapy" a week, 52 weeks a year.

proof." Although the school knew there was a conflict between its methodology and the preferred methodology of the parents, it did not offer any evidence or testimony regarding the appropriateness of its approach beyond conclusory statements that the child progressed. "As an example of the deficiency, there was no testimony regarding whether the methodology is generally accepted by the educational community or recognized by other educational experts as reasonable." In contrast, "the parents' expert witnesses provided clear examples of the type of instruction that [the child] requires in light of his academic, behavioral, and social deficiencies."

Among other issues, the transition between the intensive, home-based programs more typical of services provided under Part C of IDEA to infants and toddlers and the school-based programs provided for older children under Part B has been the source of a significant amount of litigation—particularly when the home-based programs interfere with the "least restrictive environment" mandate under Part B.

Steinmetz v. Richmond Community Schools, decided last September, demonstrates this conflict. The circumstances are in stark contrast to the *Michael M.* case discussed above. Although the parents preferred a home-based program as intensive as the one described in *Michael M.*, the school was not resistant to considering elements of the program for inclusion in the child's IEP. As in *Michael M.*, the child had autism that was diagnosed in his preschool years. Attempts by the school to implement a school-based program were rejected by the parents, who wished to have the intensive home-based program and have the school assume the financial responsibility for it. The school district had developed an "Autism Team" composed of school personnel who received initial and continuing training in evaluation and program development for students with autism. Members of the team visited the child's home-based program to observe. From the data, an IEP was developed, but the parents rejected the

program and requested a due process hearing. Expert testimony was presented by both sides. The IHO found the IEP reasonably calculated to provide the child with some educational benefit. He did not accord a great deal of credit to the expert testimony provided by the parents, because the witnesses were particularly wedded to the home-based program and were not inclined to accept any school-based program. Their testimony was often contradictory.

The court dissected the arguments of the parties by employing some of the guidelines stated in *Michael M.* Although the court was willing to concede the academic credentials of the parents' experts, the school's Autism Team and their experts had considerably more actual experience in working with students similarly situated. The school's willingness to incorporate some of the ABA methodology into its proposed program, as well as its wealth of practical knowledge in establishing programs in other school districts through its consultants, supported a finding that the school's proposed IEP was adequate. The district court also rejected the parents' assertion that the ABA program is the "only educational modality that enjoys any quantifiable success" for children with autism. The parents presented no objective evidence to support this assertion, and case law does not seem to bear this out.

As the court noted, "[J]udges are not especially well-equipped to choose between various educational methodologies. Where, as here, there is satisfactory record support for the appropriateness of the particular approach selected by the school department and approved by the state educational agency, a reviewing court should not meddle."

One of the exhibits introduced at the hearing before the IHO and upon administrative review by the Indiana Board of Special Education Appeals (BSEA) was a videotape put together from various DTT sessions. In each of the video clips, the child is observed responding to cues from mostly college students trained in this particular

ABA program. One BSEA member noted that at no time did the child initiate any activity on his own but responded only to adult cues. There was also a dearth of information regarding the child's ability to generalize mastered activities to other settings or activities. The lack of opportunity for peer interaction and socialization—primary components in the proposed IEP and preschool program—could not be met in the intensive home-based program. The preschool program would promote educational goals, objectives, and benchmarks, while continuing to address the child's evident developmental needs. The school's proposal to incorporate ABA/DTT techniques as related services in support of the preschool program was reasonably calculated, in the estimation of the IHO, the BSEA, and the district court, to provide the child with a FAPE in the LRE.

The transition between Part C and Part B programs need not be a demilitarized zone. Recent case law has looked favorably upon school districts that do not reject outright a proposed methodology the parents have found beneficial in addressing the developmental needs of their children with autism. In many situations, it is apparent that parents do not understand the different policies and consequent emphases between Part C and Part B programs. It is equally evident that a number of school districts fail to recognize or appreciate this misunderstanding. But where the school districts recognize that some techniques employed in many of these therapeutic methodologies can be employed as "related services" in support of a child's "special education," the interactive process contemplated by IDEA can be met both by the letter of the law and in its spirit.

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1. *Board of Education of Kanawha County v. Michael M.*, 95 F.Supp. 2d 600, 606 (S.D. W. Va. 2000).

The Art of State Education Policymaking

While some state boards of education have responsibility for community colleges or university systems, few state boards have specific authority over programs for students prior to their entering kindergarten. Yet state boards have increasingly come to realize that what takes place in the first five years of life can have a profound impact on later school performance. But defining the role of the education system regarding very young children can be the subject of some debate, as is seen by the predicament of the following state board of education.

This state board, in partnership with the governor and legislature, was in the fourth year of implementing a class size reduction policy. Each year the legislature had appropriated more money to reduce class sizes in grades K-3. The chief goal of the policy was to give teachers more time to focus on early literacy skills. As part of the overall literacy initiative, each student was required to pass the third grade reading test in order to move on to the fourth grade.

At its February meeting, the board reviewed four years of trend data from the third grade tests. The results were disturbing. Students who scored in the lowest 10th percentile on the kindergarten reading readiness test were more than three times as likely to score in the "inadequate" range on the third grade reading assessment than kindergartners who scored above the 70th percentile. That is, those who entered school very far behind were not catching up. A number of remediation programs were suggested to the board for statewide adoption during the meeting. Yet board members felt that just as with their entire literacy focus, the answer lay in prevention rather than remediation. The board tabled the vote on the remediation programs.

Prevention meant looking at children's experiences prior to school entry. This was uncharted territory for the board. Head Start programs in the state were administered out of the Department of Health and Family Services. Other preschool programs were community based, run by churches or other nonprofit or for-profit entities. None of these programs were subject to state regulation, let alone regulation by the department of education. In addition, while community day care centers were subject to Health and Family Services licensing requirements, these essentially encompassed health and safety codes. As the state board surveyed the preschool "landscape," it was populated with independent systems of child care and preschool programs that had varying program goals and components. And while the education system needed to receive students who were ready to learn, it had no authority to compel preschool and day care programs to produce children ready to learn.

What could the state board do?

The board decided that in order to bring focus to early literacy prior to kindergarten enrollment, they had to elicit the support of the governor. In discussions with the governor, the board framed the need for a comprehensive, statewide approach to the preschool population as another facet of the governor's literacy initiative, not a new early childhood initiative. At the state board's request, the governor established a task force to develop comprehensive standards for public and private preschool programs. A key component of the standards was to be early literacy, and the governor appointed reading specialists to the panel to support the development of that component. The governor then introduced legislation to provide state funding to all preschool programs—both public and private—that met the standards.

As for the state board, it amended its transportation policies to allow districts to transport children from kindergarten to any day care center in the district that met the state standards for early literacy. Districts were instructed to invite local preschool and day care providers to attend inservice training sessions on early literacy as part of their reading programs. And the state board amended its regulations to allow community providers an opportunity to purchase instructional materials through districts in order to take advantage of lower prices. In addition, the board directed education department staff to work with Health and Family Services staff to develop a database for those early childhood programs that met the state's literacy standards. This data would be converted to a statewide map available on the Internet, where it would serve as a referral guide for families looking for a quality preschool or daycare. In addition, by noting other programs that do not meet standards, the database would also alert families and community agencies to programs that should be avoided. Hence, the database would create an incentive for programs to meet the literacy standards without actually creating a requirement to do so.

Finally, as a complement to this work, the board did approve the implementation of the remediation programs at its May meeting, with the understanding that the numbers of students needing these programs should decrease in each successive year of the program. The board also set annual review dates to evaluate the eligibility data for third grade reading remediation as a way to determine the success of the preschool efforts.

Virginia Roach is deputy executive director of NASBE.

by Virginia Roach



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